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People in Between: The Value of Life Stories in Exploring the Needs of Colombian Asylum Seekers

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People in Between: The Value of Life Stories in Exploring the Needs
of Colombian Asylum Seekers

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Applied Anthropology
College of Arts and Sciences
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Dedication

To my Mother and late Father,
Rekha and Radha Valliappan, for your knowledge, love, wisdom and guidance.

And to my loving Husband,
Akash Nanda, for all these and more.

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Abstract

The long, protracted civil war, spanning nearly fifty years, in the South American nation of Colombia has displaced almost four million civilians in as much time. Tens of thousands of refugees were resettled in Ecuador, Panama, Venezuela and other neighboring countries. Some, still threatened in their country of first asylum, and resettled to the United States (US) with their families, must learn to navigate the often complex systems of life and living in America. Resettlement programs that focus primarily on immediate needs such as employment and accommodations are aware of the growing need for more long-term assistance. However, while there is much research on how to improve refugee resettlement services generally, there is very limited research on the nature of services that might be needed long-term or the duration that they may be necessary, for asylum seekers specifically.

This ethnographic research examines in detail the long term needs of two Colombian asylum seekers who resettled with their families to a suburban neighborhood in a city in the southern part of the United States. A series of life history interviews, participant observation, ethnographic immersion and secondary research over the course of a one-year internship with an agency servicing survivors of political torture – refugees, asylees and asylum seekers – uncovered opportunities for bridging perceived gaps in service and highlighting ones that are critical to the long-term successful resettlement and transition of asylum seekers. Four dominant themes emerged from the research: (1) *New Identities / Roles* – understanding new constructions of self and other; (2) *Belonging* –

coping with new identities, building trust and setting up roots; (3) *Legitimacy* – power, representation of asylum seekers and its effects on access to services; and (4) *Aspirations* – goals for the future.

Chapter 1: Thesis Overview

1.1 Introduction

Refugees are forced to flee their countries for a variety of reasons – war, conflict, persecution and severe human rights violations are some of the major motivations. Since World War II, the United States has been involved in resettling more than four million refugees and survivors of torture across many of its nation’s cities and towns (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2011). Some are granted refuge prior to arriving while others arrive and then seek asylum. Regardless of how their statuses are adjudicated, the journey to arriving at their safe haven is most often long and arduous, beginning well before they are forced to make such life-altering decisions.

Leaving family, friends and their lives behind, refugees face the daunting task of adjusting to a new life in their new home. Resettlement programs such as those offered by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provide much needed immediate assistance with cash, medical, social services and healthcare screenings “so that they can achieve self-sufficiency and integration within the shortest time period after arriving in the United States” (2011), which typically means 90 days, and additional funding can be secured for up to eight months (Violet 2000). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local charities and private humanitarian groups also form part of this network that allows refugees to avail themselves of services and programs at the federal, state and local levels.

Employment is one of the major focuses of resettlement programs – the aim is to

move refugees away from dependency on public support as soon as possible. Language is another key area that has been identified as being crucial to successful assimilation¹. However, according to Engstrom and Okamura, “torture survivors require extensive supportive, adjunct and basic life services that span long periods of time” (2004:301).

Recent research conducted by applied anthropologists attempting to solve some of refugee resettlement’s complexities include assessments of mental health needs of resettled refugees (Fox 2009); in depth portraits of families adjusting to life in a Midwestern suburb (Pipher 2002); and an exploration of how resettled refugees adapt to policy changes that affect them (Sowa 2009). There is relatively little published literature in refugee studies that specifically focused on asylum seekers, but there is growing interest among scholars in studying the two populations separately, because unlike refugees who can obtain various benefits upon arrival at their host countries, asylum seekers do not, and they often live in the shadows while awaiting their cases to get approved (Silove & Steel 1998). In the US, refugees and asylum seeker cases are processed differently – refugees are accorded refugee status prior to arrival in the country (and therefore have access to many social, welfare and economic benefits upon arrival), unlike asylum seekers who only apply for asylum after they arrive (asylum cases often take a long a long time to adjudicate, thereby placing additional burden on the individual and family as they wait to be conferred legal asylum status which would allow them

¹ According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term *assimilation* means “the cultural absorption of a minority group into the main cultural body.” Within the context of the refugee experience, Stein’s chapter in *Refugees and Mental Health* is useful in conceptualizing assimilation. He borrows from works by S. N. Eisenstadt and Milton Gordon in defining this term. Referencing Gordon, Stein states that there are three elements to assimilation: “1) Anglo- conformity or, in more universal terms, host-conformity--the refugee must become like the native, completely accepting the dominant culture; 2) the Melting Pot, a romantic American idea that probably never existed (Gordon, 1964; Haavio-Mannila and Stenias, 1965), it sees both the native and the refugee being changed, merged into a new and supposedly better alloy; and 3) cultural pluralism, the refugee will acculturate to the dominant pattern particularly for politics, play, education and work, but will preserve his communal life and much of his culture” (1986).

access to benefits refugees get). There are many policy issues and legal constraints that scholars say can and have exacerbated further trauma for these individuals and their families. Survivors of torture within this population are made even more vulnerable due to factors such as unemployment, separation from family, and difficulty in accessing health, welfare and educational services (Procter 2005).

According to a recent Congressional Research Service Report, Colombia ranked sixth in the number of filed asylum cases behind China, Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador (2011:16). Although overall asylee adjustments have comprised only 4% of the total number of adjustments to legal permanent residence within the past decade, many argue that asylum issues are “less about the number of foreign nationals involved and more about the qualities of the policies and the efficacy of the procedures...[which may be] clear at times and nebulous at other times” (32).

This thesis focuses on one NGO – Center for Refugees (CfR)² – that provides much needed long-term assistance to refugees, asylees and asylum seekers, most of whom are survivors of torture. It is specifically concerned with exploring the needs of asylum seekers from Colombia.

1.2 Objectives

The purpose of this research was to explore some of the long-term needs of Colombian asylum seekers and how they were being met by programs and services offered at the CfR. The research questions were addressed using a life history method, focusing in detail on the life experiences of two asylum seekers. Using the life history

² Pseudonym

approach was critical in providing a very rich, detailed understanding of the asylum seeker experience. According to Bathmaker (2010), the extent to which details of individual lives emerge from life history research is the primary aspect of this methodology. The approach is useful in understanding constructs of self and enactments of identity. Bathmaker argues that, “identity matters, both because identities shape people’s practices and because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positionings... narrative and life history research are strongly associated with moves to restore individual agency” (3). From a methodological perspective, the life history approach also helps us understand the asylum seeker experience from an *emic* or “insider” perspective. Blommaert (2001) succinctly makes this point in her article on African asylum seekers in Belgium, stating that, “the structure and functions of narratives” represent critical communicative resources for asylum seekers, and that “without recourse to the long and detailed narratives about home, escape and traveling, asylum seekers cannot make their motives and causes [understood]” (2001:413-414).

I focused my research on three central areas of inquiry: (1) How do Colombian asylum seekers view their well-being?; (2) What factors help achieve a standard of well-being during resettlement?; and (3) What obstacles detract from well-being during resettlement? Ahearn describes “well-being” as, “the state of being or doing well in life; happy, healthy, or prosperous condition; moral or physical welfare (of a person or community)” as being a commonly used term for scholars and researchers (2000:4). In order to achieve this, he refers to Dasgupta’s comment that a refugee “needs to have agency, independence, and self-determination... to be content” (4).

Thus, it was during discussions with my supervisor at the CfR that I decided to investigate some of the experiences and concerns of Colombian asylum seekers during resettlement, so that the Center can, in turn, improve upon or develop programs and services that are pertinent and helpful to this population.

The CfR provides a variety of treatment and support services to survivors of political torture who have fled their countries. The Center works with a network of service providers such as psychiatrists, psychologists, interpreters, social workers, attorneys, and physicians who provide myriad services to their clients including a comprehensive in-home intake complete with psychological evaluation and assessment; contact with medical, mental health, legal and social service providers; professional interpreters as needed; and on-going case management and culturally sensitive educational and support groups. Called the “wraparound approach,” this type of treatment involves community support and networking as well as direct treatment to the survivor and her/his family members (Kira 2002).

In January 2006, I began a one-year internship with the CfR that marked the commencement of this project. Except for yearly satisfaction surveys, the agency had never investigated how programs and services measured up to the needs of their clients or conducted independent studies to understand the need-states of their clientele. At the time I started, I was told the satisfaction surveys yielded positive feedback overall; the agency was nevertheless interested in exploring what were some of the long-term needs of clients in order to understand how to better meet those needs.

Of the two types of clients served at the CfR—refugees and asylum seekers—the agency was more interested in documenting the needs of the latter, especially those from

Colombia. At the time I began my internship, the largest population of asylum seekers served through the CfR were from Colombia. The agency primarily assisted them by providing references to immigration attorneys; however according to my supervisor, these clients are typically on their own until they are approved for asylum and are able to apply for governmental benefits, and therefore face very different challenges from those who have been extended refugee status prior to arriving in the US. The large numbers of Colombian asylum seekers being serviced at the Center, as well as intent on the part of the organization to better serve their needs, were major factors that contributed to selecting this population for my research.

1.3 Center for Refugees

The CfR was a relatively new, federally-funded torture rehabilitation program in the US; at the start of my internship, the Center had been in operation for nearly five years. The organization where I interned was one of more than two dozen such agencies in the nation dedicated to serving refugees and asylum seekers who are survivors of political torture. It fell under the umbrella of a larger social service organization, and received funding from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the Torture Victims Relief Act of 1998. During my internship, the office staff consisted of a director, community services coordinator, a case worker, two program specialists, an administrative assistant, a graduate intern, several interpreters who were hired on an as-needed or per contract basis, and volunteers who sometimes assisted with program or event management. The Center claims to value one of its chief propositions – being a

“center without walls,” in that its staff promotes a multi-pronged approach, outside of the physical boundaries of the Center, to treatment via the offering of a network of service providers in a variety of fields, such as psychiatry, psychology, medicine, social work, legal services and interpreter services. As part of this concept, the Center routinely recruits and trains interested professionals.

Clients rarely made in-person visits to the Center. According to my supervisor in a private conversation in February 2006, this was because, “... once in-take is complete, [the program specialists] follow-up with clients on the phone or visit with them at their homes, if necessary.... We’re here for them, however often they need us and in whatever way they prefer to communicate with us. Nothing is forced upon them and [the clients] prefer it this way.”

My internship at the CfR began in January 2006 and lasted one year. I served as a graduate research intern – my duties included general administrative work, assisting with organizing programs, such as a training workshop with area physicians to educate them on the types of services needed and the kinds of clients served, conducting literature reviews and immersing in fieldwork during the last four months of the internship. My internship supervisor in this research was the community services coordinator, who played a key role in introducing me to the CfR staff, Center culture, and defining the subject of my research. According to my supervisor, the Center was originally dedicated to serving the refugee population in the area – the inclusion of asylum seekers was a recent development and therefore less was known about their experiences and needs. Stated my supervisor in a private conversation,

“... sometimes [refugees] arrive as a group, so we attempt to find them

homes in the same neighborhoods or where there are existing refugees from their countries. With asylum seekers, it's a bit different. They often arrive by themselves or with some family, so there's no sense of that collective experience. We try and connect them to people from their own countries, but it's not always easy.”

CfR hopes to benefit from this research by gaining valuable knowledge on the experiences of Colombian asylum seekers generally, how they may or may not differ from other asylum seeker or refugee experiences, and how to improve services available to them, more specifically.

1.4 A Brief History of the Colombian Conflict

According to the Colombia country report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2011), the civil war in Colombia has been raging for several decades and has claimed thousands of lives. Major players in the war include leftist guerilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), fighting battles with the government and right-wing paramilitary groups for territorial control, and accusing each other of drug trafficking. All these groups have committed many crimes against civilians, including killings, assassinations, and many other mass human rights violations. Today the FARC continues to maintain *de facto* control over large parts of Colombia, and although the paramilitary groups have been largely demobilized, they also still maintain strong control in certain areas of the country. Both guerilla and paramilitary groups force civilians to pay “war

taxes” and anyone who does not pay is punished (e.g., kidnapped, killed, forced to serve the group, etc.). Due to these constant threats, thousands of Colombians have been forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in other parts of the country or in other countries. Verney (2006) states that the Colombian situation remains a major concern to the UNHCR and is considered to be the greatest humanitarian tragedy in the Western hemisphere.

The presence of various armed groups and the inability of the government to provide adequate protection to its citizens has caused many Colombians to continue fleeing their homes. According to the UNHCR, many Colombians who seek asylum in other countries often fail to officially apply for asylum either as a result of being unaware of local asylum policies, or fears of discrimination or deportation.

1.5 Terminology

ASYLUM SEEKER – A person who, from fear of persecution, has crossed an international border into a country in which he/she hopes to be granted asylum

CfR – Center for Refugees

HEALTH – According to the World Health Organization constitution, health is not only limited to absence of disease and illness, but also refers to a state of complete mental, physical and social well being

NGO – Non governmental organization

ORR – Office for Refugee Resettlement

REFUGEE – A person, subjected to a well-founded fear of being persecuted, is outside of his/her country of nationality, and due to that fear, is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1.6 Overview of Chapters

The central purpose of this thesis is to explore the long-term needs of asylum seekers from Colombia from the purview of the asylum seekers themselves. In Chapter 1, I have laid out a brief overview of the overall thesis, the research questions this research addresses, provided an introduction to the Center for Refugees (CfR), as well as listed relevant terminology that will be used throughout this paper.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed review of the literature related to this research study. It begins with a brief synopsis of trends and policies related to US refugees and asylum seekers, including the similarities that bind them and those that set them apart. The literature review also includes discussions of asylum seeker experiences, both pre- and post-resettlement, which drew on a variety of subject areas. The review also provides an overview of trauma literature, an explanation of strengths-based approaches, literature on identity and social constructions of self as well as a critique of the wraparound model of treatment for survivors of torture.

Chapter 3 outlines the research setting, design and methodologies used for this study as well as describes the internship period during the course of my one-year tenure at the CfR. A substantive portion of this chapter looks at the life history methodology in detail – its rationale as well as use in anthropological inquiry. I also discuss the role of gatekeepers, exposure to potential participants and the recruitment strategy behind the selection of study participants. Additionally, because this study involved fieldwork with a potentially vulnerable population, I also discuss the various ethical considerations I

followed and practiced in my role as researcher.

Chapter 4 gives a detailed outlook of the results from this study. I discuss my initial meeting with the participants and subsequent interviews with each. My research eventually uncovered four major themes that best highlight the experiences of asylum seekers: (1) *New Identities / Roles* – insight into life in Colombia and the shifting sense of identities; (2) *Belonging* – coping with new constructions of self and other; (3) *Legitimacy* – the lack of agency and power and perceived effects in the ability to access services; and (4) *Aspirations* – uncovering needs and hopes for the future.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, provides a discussion of the themes and findings from an anthropological perspective, as well as recommendations for addressing the experiences of asylum seekers at the CfR. I also discuss study limitations as well potential areas for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Overview of US Refugee Resettlement Policy

The definition of “refugees” has gone through several revisions throughout the course of history. The dictionary definition of the term “refugee” traces its roots to the French “refugié”, with the word first being used in 1685 to describe the French Huguenots who migrated after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. It was only after World War I that it evolved into being “one fleeing home.” Its interpretation today is a result of the fallout from World War II, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established to help the over one million Europeans who were uprooted return home (2011).

According to the UNHCR, a refugee is:

“A person residing outside his or her country of nationality, who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (1996).

Operating in 123 countries and servicing more than 43 million displaced people (of which 10.4 million are refugees and nearly one million are asylum seekers), the agency offers three possible resolutions to the problem: (1) repatriation, (2) local integration into the country of first asylum, and (3) resettlement into the third country (2011). According to the UNHCR and legal scholars in the subject, the first two solutions are more desirable, but not always practicable, therefore making the third option – resettlement – a

likelier solutions for many refugees worldwide.

In the United States, Howell asserts, resettlement can be traced to the “first major refugee assistance program [that] was created for Cubans who fled to the United States after the fall of the Batista regime in 1959” (1982:119). Modern day US resettlement policies (known as the Refugee Act in the Immigration Nationalities Act) were established as a result of The Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol (Foreign Policy Association 1992). According to the ORR, the US has resettled approximately 2.6 million refugees since 1975 (2011). In consultation with Congress, the President determines the yearly quota for refugee admissions, and for the fiscal year 2011, the ceiling has been set for 80,000 refugees to be admitted – most of who will be from the Near East/South Asia and East Asia (Immigration Policy Center 2011).

Refugees are admitted into the country if they satisfy three primary criteria: (1) Individuals with a credible fear of persecution who have no other durable solution; (2) Individuals of “special concern” as defined by the Department of State, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, UNHCR and certain non-governmental organizations; and (3) Certain relatives of refugees already resettled in the US (Immigration Policy Center 2011). To begin the process of qualifying for refugee status, the Immigration Policy Center (IPC) asserts individuals must first be able to access a US refugee processing post, undergo thorough interviewing, security screening, medical examinations and other checks, before being conditionally accepted as a refugee (2011). The US works with a variety of voluntary agencies to help determine where refugees will resettle as well as assists with providing short term (typically 90 days) services such as housing, clothing, counseling, etc., and after one year, refugees are able to apply for

permanent residency (2011).

There is considerable literature from anthropologists and many other scholars on issues surrounding refugee resettlement. According to Black, the literature on refugees dates back over 50 years ago, with an influx of research seen in the past 15-20 years (2001:57). Gray and Elliott have identified several types of phenomena as they pertain to “both the process and outcome” of refugee resettlement, including “acculturation, biculturalism, multiculturalism, marginalization, assimilation, integration, segregation and settlement” (2001:19-20). This is by no means an exhaustive list, as refugee research can be found across many subject areas outside of anthropology such as geography, psychology, law, psychiatry, and nutrition, among others.

2.2 US Asylum Seekers

According to the Congressional Research Service, “foreign nationals seeking asylum must demonstrate a well-founded fear that if returned home, they will be persecuted based upon one of five characteristics: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (2011). Upon arrival in the US, the process starts with applying for asylum with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) or before an immigration judge during removal proceedings (1). Asylum seeking in the US can be traced to 1967, when the country became involved in a UN protocol relating to the “principle of nonrefoulement,” meaning “an alien will not be returned to a country where his life or freedom would be threatened” (2). After passage of the Refugee Act in 1980, there were several spikes in asylum

applications due to major events, which Zucker and Zucker call “phenomen[a] of mass escape”, such as the Mariel Boatlift incident, violence and civil wars in Central America, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre, which eventually led to a backlog of asylum cases totaling more than 457,000 applications in 1995. Asylum cases dropped in the wake of the introduction of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, and the REAL ID Act of 2005, when applicants had to meet further standards for adjudication (2-3; 1996:66). Under current law, asylum seekers have one year from date of entry into the country to file an application for asylum (Congressional Research Service 2011).

Much of the literature on asylum seeker experiences is rooted in research on refugee resettlement in general, as many authors and scholars use both terms interchangeably. Although experiences of separation, violence, forcible removal, torture, and imprisonment all have greatly impacted resettlement and acculturation for refugees and asylum seekers alike, there is a growing call among researchers, legal representatives and scholars for the need to study post-migration effects on asylum seekers separately from refugees. According to Silove and Steel, “asylum seekers remain largely hidden” in society due to existing policies that limit their ability to obtain basic services such as those available to refugees (1998:4). As a result, “mental health, legal and welfare workers have witnessed high levels of despair amongst asylum seekers pursuing claims for residency,” many of whom have had to wait several years before their cases are adjudicated (4). In a report summarizing five studies on the post-migration stresses of asylum seekers, Silove and Steel discovered the kind of impact on mental health to be the same as those “that often follow exposure to extreme forms of pre-migration trauma” (4).

The authors caution about the risks in “dealing with traumatized asylum seekers in the same manner as “overstayers” who attempt to exploit immigration loopholes”, and emphasize the importance of setting in place humane provisions to help mitigate the stresses they face (4). Rees also discusses the impact of post-migration stress on the well-being of asylum seekers in her study on East Timorese women in Australia (2003). Although she argues for an overall speedier processing of asylum seeker cases, she stresses the criticality in recognizing the needs for access “to essential and gender specific supports and services” (96).

In a different study on post-migration stress of asylum seekers in the US, O’Mahony and Sweeney analyze the effects of being without housing (2010). They define “housing” as not merely being a physical structure that provides us with a roof over our heads, but also one that encompasses the “experiential elements of dwelling”, and in the case of the feelings of “homelessness” commonly documented of asylum seekers, “alienation from the conditions of well-being” (285). Their research takes a law and policy perspective that is instrumental in an “official discourse based on the denial of housing and the avoidance of home attachments, which effectively keeps the asylum seekers in a state of ontological homelessness and alienation” (285).

Björnberg (2011), who discusses the importance of social networks among asylum seeking families, provides an expansive overview of the networking factors that are important to the well-being of asylum seekers, as well as highlights how they cope with the experiences while seeking asylum. She draws upon theories of resilience, social capital, trust and social recognition as primary drivers of overall well-being. Bernardes et al. (2010), in a study investigating the factors affecting psychological distress among

asylum seekers highlights that not only is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) common among this population, but other post-migratory concerns such as “accommodation, discrimination, worry about family at home [and] not being allowed to work” are specific concerns that need attention and that set this group apart from refugees in general, and therefore require clear and distinct approaches to service delivery (3).

A. Trauma and Focus on Strength-Based Approaches

The literature on trauma and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is extensive. Hollifield et al. (2005) and McKinney (2007) are among authors who argue that the industry standard categories of trauma – physical, psychological, sexual and combat – are often inadequate in describing the range and depth of all trauma experienced in a particular community of refugees. For example, with refugees suffering from PTSD, there is concern about existing instruments being inadequate to measure the presence of the disorder particularly on refugees from non-Western countries (Tilbury & Rapley 2004; Ahearn, Jr. 2000). Research also cautions that while many newly arrived refugees may have serious mental health needs, not all experience PTSD (Weinstein et al. 1999).

There is growing research showing that trauma and PTSD sufferers display positive health outcomes when evaluations focus on a person’s life story prior to the development of traumatic events, as a way to recognize that trauma is only one part of the entire life story. Gangsei and Deutsch (2007) provide an example: “one evaluator began working with a Central African man in his 30s whose torture, loss of family and damage to physical function had left him with severely impaired self-esteem. The first two-hour

session was devoted entirely to review his pre-torture life, after which he reported feeling more hopeful than he had for a long time” (84).

Other researchers recommend using a strengths-based approach that moves away from portraying survivors of torture as “passive victims” but as resilient immigrants (Malkki 1996; Watters 2001; Rajaram 2002; Whittaker et al. 2005; Björnberg 2011). This focus also appears in other studies, such as Grigg-Saito et al.’s (2007) study of the resettlement of Cambodian refugees in Lowell, MA, where the authors assert that a strength-based approach positively impacts health outcomes: “(1) by increasing participants’ engagement in services, (2) by increasing family empowerment, and (3) by enhancing the ability of participants to build relationships and social support” (418). Singh and Strand also discovered that “the individual is rarely consulted about their definition of the problem behavior or regarding what, if any, behavior should be the target of treatment” in their case study of a hospital-based treatment of an adult with serious mental illness (2008:397).

B. Identity and Culture

One of the mainstays of refugee research is that of identity and culture – how people change, and what is lost or gained in the process of resettlement. According to Fanjoy (2008), in a recent study on immigrants in Australia:

“Many respondents used an onion-like model to describe their sense of identity - a core identity in the center surrounded by layers of situational identities which were emphasized or de-emphasized based on the context in which they found themselves. This contextual view of identity

contradicts linear acculturation models (Berry 1986) and fits better with transnational and post-modernist theories of identity which recognize that immigration and integration “occurs within the context of two or more locations and that (new) identities are forged across this space (Sherrell 2006)” (11).

Williksen’s (2004) provocative research about an asylum seeker in Norway provides an in depth look into her subject’s struggle with thinking about herself and coping with the experiences of being an asylum seeker. In a Boston Khmer refugee community, Smith-Hefner (2009) details the relationship between language and identity in describing the dismay felt by parents about their children who would not or could not maintain bilingual capabilities. In addition, the parents were not able to learn English, which was perceived to damage their social standing in the eyes of neighbors and friends. Her research is one example of refugees having to adjust and cope with two varying cultures, roles and identities. Anthropologists have long been familiar with theories of social construction of community of self and identity-making. In a study of displaced villagers from a rural farming community in Orissa, India, Behura and Nayak discovered how resettlement altered “patterns of marriage alliance, combined with estrangement in the family, weakening of kinship ties, and mounting inter-caste tensions...[to] become characteristics of the resettled villages” (1993:284). Far from being static creations, newer theories on identity, as suggested by Guerrero and Tinkler, “maintain that the social construction of self is a process of identification that is dynamic, multiple and constructed through social interaction with others” (2010:55). Through community-based photography projects, the authors studied a group of internally displaced children in the

US and Colombia, who were actively involved in creating and reconstructing their experiences through language and social interactions. Results showed that myths and realities forged new identities of self. In this study, the authors used a theoretical framework based on sociocultural theories of self and identity, “which maintain that the construction of self is a process of identification that is dynamic, multiple, and constructed through social interaction with others” (56). Their analysis aims at distinguishing between actual and designated identities, where actual identities are ones that “describe the actual circumstances of people” and designated identities “are stories told in future tense or using expressions of wish, commitment, obligation, or necessity, which are expected to become a part of one’s actual identity” (57). In their study, they discovered the children actively involved in constructions both actual and designated identities.

Treatment modalities between two groups of refugees or asylum seekers can also differ. Morris and Silove (1992) provide an illuminating outlook into how psychotherapy treatment used for survivors of torture from South America can differ from treatment used for those from Indochina. Similarly, Warner (2007) takes us into an in depth study of the Q’eqchi’ refugee community of Mexico, where clinicians provided medical and other types of assistance to widows because they were believed to be more vulnerable than women with husbands in the community. In her initial analysis, Warner discovered that “widowhood was not necessarily the best or the only way to identify women most in need of material and medical assistance... [and suggested] to the clinic staff that the presence of natal kin, and, in particular, the presence of a woman’s mother in the refugee community, was the most significant factor affecting Q’eqchi’ women’s overall health,

security, and well-being” (194). Her review of the existing literature revealed that “refugee communities are not homogeneous; segments within them experience disempowerment unequally” (194).

Research on refugee resettlement and immigration also draws on the literature on objectification and the “Other,” such as di Leonardo’s work, which discusses our fascination for the “exotic other” (1998:13). According to Fabian (1983), anthropology was used by colonizing Europeans to make sense of the colonized as culturally different other. Schneider further supports this point, “cultural difference and identity bore a clear advantage: to state that the others are what we see in them, because that is what they are” (2002:13). In the writing of refugee life experiences, Rajaram criticizes the creation of refugee ‘images’ that “commoditize” and “objectify” refugee identities according to host communities” (2002:251). Specifically, Rajaram criticizes humanitarian agencies’ representation of refugees as helpless victims. He suggests this connotation “consigns refugees to their bodies, to a mute and faceless physical mass” (251). He further states that “narration of refugee experiences becomes the prerogative of Western ‘experts’: refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced” (251).

Within the group of refugees and immigrants, not all are treated equally. As Horton points out after her detailed investigation of the public health care system’s participation in the differential construction of “deservingness” of benefits accorded to Cuban and Mexican immigrants (2004:472). In her investigation, Horton discovered that from a macro perspective, while Cuban refugees have been welcomed into the country as “political immigrants” and “success stories,” Mexican immigrants have been perceived as “silent” invaders who are a “drain” on American resources (474). Horton points out that

that these diverging conceptions of “moral worthiness” have affected ways in which the health care system now treats one segment as “deserving” and the other as not (474-475). Horton also references Aihwa Ong’s discussion of “subjectification” of immigrant groups by civic organizations such as hospitals, pointing out the latter’s influence in “making different kinds of minorities” (474).

C. The Wraparound Approach

Although torture impacts societies and communities on many levels, this research focuses on individuals and their families. For refugees and asylum seekers, the process of assimilation in the host country is oftentimes arduous and punctuated with repeated victimization that can affect the individual’s emotional, physical and social well-being. The wraparound approach to rehabilitation of torture survivors has received much acclaim in literature. Often tagged as “integrated case management”, “interdisciplinary” or “multi-systemic” in nature, its basic concept – treatment through the usage of various dimensions of social networks – is not new (Kira 2002; OCASI 2009). According to a study conducted by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), “many cultures have for centuries gathered around vulnerable people to assist them. It is a humane and human response for intentional communities to gather around a person who is facing a particular challenge to provide support” (2009).

The approach however, is not without its critics. Jacobson states that in implementing a wraparound approach, “givers and receivers of support may differ about the meaning of the act intended to be supportive” (1987:42). As an example, Jacobson refers to the condition of “mothering” versus “smothering” in a parent-child relationship.

He suggests focusing on social support through a meaning-centered approach, which would provide context to variances in stressful life events – that “the same event may have different meaning to different individuals and to the same individual in different situations and at different times” meaning that the “stressfulness of an event reflects an individual’s appraisal of it, rather than its objective attributes” (45). A meaning-centered approach therefore places the power to interpret or define events on the individual needing social/support networks (45). Jacobson also cites numerous studies conducted by other researchers suggesting another critical element of this approach to be *timing*, and “that the perception of behavior as supportive is a function of when it is offered” (46). He illustrates this point as follows:

“People go through stages or phases of adjustment as they attempt to find meaning in their lives after a stressful experience, especially one involving loss.... In a transition, the individual is confronted with the necessity of relinquishing old assumptions and establishing new ones. In this process of cognitive restructuring, individuals typically do not begin to manage the reorganization of their new lives until they have given up the idea of what they have lost. Until individuals reach that turning point, advice or information about how they should or could lead their lives is not typically experienced as supportive. This, it is suggested, explains why an action perceived to be supportive at one phase or stage of adjustment to loss may be seen as unhelpful at another – an example of the “right” support at the “wrong” time” (46).

Furthering this discussion, Eastmond reminds us that the anthropology of health encompasses the “culturally varying ways in which people experience, define, and explain health and illness.... the ways in which they communicate illness and distress and the kinds of treatments they seek” (2000:68-69). She cites an example of conceptions of “ill health in a [Western] biomedical model [which] may elsewhere be classified in a wider category of human misfortune... they may be classified as a social rather than a medical problem” (69).

2.3 Summary

Drawing on several different genres of literature, this review sheds light on various aspects of the post-migration asylum seeker experience. It begins with literature on US refugee resettlement policy – an overview of refugee movements and how individuals come to seek refuge in the US, as well as general themes that affect them. Literature on US asylum seekers is often found embodied within the general literature on refugees; however there is growing evidence for the need to differentiate the two. The literature focuses on the definition of asylum seeker, as well as the similarities and differences in experience between them and refugees. The issues of primary interest that exacerbate post-migration stressors include lack of access to many social and welfare benefits such as employment, housing, healthcare, mental health and legal assistance. The literature highlights the breadth and depth of trauma suffered as well as a strengths-based approach that focuses on resilience and survivorship. The literature on identity and culture underlines the many challenges asylum seekers face in negotiating their identities

and making sense of the new world around them. Additionally, research also uncovers the problems in treating asylum seekers as a collective group of people versus individuals in need of different treatment approaches. This literature review concludes with a description of the wraparound approach employed by many NGOs in the treatment of survivors of torture. It provides an overview of the approach as well as highlights one of its chief criticisms, the need for a meaning-centered approach, which places the power of defining the type of and time for treatment in the hands of the individual receiving it.

This research study is informed in particular by the literature that pertains to the post-migration experiences of Colombian asylum seekers. Findings from the study will help develop greater understanding of their situation, which will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on resettlement issues more generally. Within the body of literature on resettlement experiences, asylum seekers are often under-studied as they generally remain hidden from mainstream research primarily due to fears about their immigration status. It is my hope this study will highlight not only the traumatic experiences asylum seekers face upon resettlement, but also critically assess the added trauma involved in accessing basic social and welfare services. Through analysis of problems facing asylum seekers, this study also contributes to an understanding of the resettlement experiences that shape or take apart constructs of self and others. This study addresses a particular group of asylum seekers (those from Colombia), and it focuses in depth on the experience of two individuals within that group. However, it is my hope that this study will help further the knowledge on asylum seeker resettlement and targeted treatment approaches that help improve the well-being of affected individuals. Tailored treatment based on ethnicity or geographic origin is relatively under-studied, and while this research makes

no comparison between Colombians and any other asylum seeker segment, further investigation is needed to determine if there are indeed any advantages to ethnic-based treatments.

Chapter 3: Research Setting and Methodology

3.1 Internship

I began my one-year internship with the Center for Refugees (CfR) in January 2006, and spent the last four months of my internship on data collection. As an intern at the CfR office, my duties included general office work (e.g. cataloging surveys and articles, conducting literature reviews, etc.). I also helped organize programs, such as a training workshop with area physicians to educate them on the types of services needed and the kinds of clients served, and a picnic with Colombian asylum seekers at a local park, among others.

Due to staffing shortages, I was able to participate in a variety of roles. I had the opportunity to attend training sessions conducted by my supervisor for three interpreters interested in working for the Center. The training sessions involved a presentation, reading material as well as video of the refugees, asylum seekers and survivors of political torture and how to work with them. My overall internship experience allowed me to immerse in the workings of the Center and gain a holistic picture of refugees and asylum seekers not only from themselves, but also from providers, staff, and volunteers.

During my time as a volunteer intern, I also had the opportunity to attend several support group meetings with Colombian asylum seekers. These were usually led by the community services coordinator or a program specialist, and held at a nearby church. The meet-ups typically lasted about one hour and covered any topic the asylum seekers wished to discuss. The staff member from CfR in attendance answered questions and

provided guidance on issues as necessary. Most discussion topics centered around legal (e.g. how to fill certain immigration forms, how to appeal an asylum case that was denied, etc.), and medical issues (e.g. questions about healthcare terminology, etc.). The discussions were always informal, with members being allowed to express themselves freely. It is important to note that the majority of clients used this time to catch up on the latest goings-on with other members / families. The experience in general was critical in allowing me to establish trust and rapport with potential research participants, as well as provide me with a strong understanding of the types of services offered and how they were being utilized.

My experiences as an intern at CfR laid the foundation for my eventual research topic. My supervisor and I spoke in greater detail about my interest in studying the expressed needs of Colombian asylum seekers using a life history approach, and about how this type of research could benefit the Center. My supervisor was very supportive of the project and expressed her vision for my research being only a part of a lengthier project, whereby further research can be conducted with other populations served through the Center. The end goal for CfR would be to compile a comprehensive list of needs and recommendations.

3.2 Methodology

In this study, I used a mixed methodology approach, although my main method was life history.

A. Quantitative Data Analysis

According to Bernard, “quantitative analysis in the social sciences involves reducing people (as observed directly or through their texts) to numbers” (2006:452). Quantitative data available through and collected by the CfR on their clients was one of the earliest sources I used to gain a basic understanding of potential participants.

At the onset of my research study at the CfR, my supervisor indicated the Center’s preference for focusing on Colombian asylum seekers as they were the largest clients being served. Analyzing CfR’s client database allowed me to confirm this information, as well as gain some understanding of the total clients served, such as gender, age, and country of birth. After I had identified participants for the study, I was also allowed to read their intake notes, and case notes filed by a program specialist or case worker after a program, visit to the doctor, phone call to the Center, or other interactions.

Although having access to basic client information could not provide details of the needs of asylum seekers in general or those from Colombia in particular, it was still a valuable resource in helping me gain familiarity with the types of clients served and how certain services were utilized. For example, the client database revealed most to be between the ages of 25 and 50 years of age, with a near equal split of males and females. The majority in both gender categories were from Colombia, with the rest coming from Bosnia, Haiti, Liberia and other countries.

I was also allowed to browse through the Center’s annual client satisfaction survey which was translated based on clients’ language familiarity. It was a one-page,

anonymous survey administered to registered clients to obtain feedback on the performance of the Center in general. Questions were mostly closed-ended, asking about the types of services accessed. Those that were open-ended were focused on reasons for liking-disliking a program or service and any improvements clients felt were needed for a better experience. The surveys in general did not yield very much information and many clients did not elaborate on performance of services. It was also unclear as to how surveys were solicited from clients who were not literate. Nevertheless, they provided some useful broad data that informed the development of my more focused methodology. From the questionnaires I was able to identify, broadly, which services were the most in demand, such as referrals to health, mental health and legal professionals. Respondents were also asked how and what has made them feel welcomed (or not) in their new home, however the lack of response suggested further inquiry was necessary in order to understand what exactly were client needs and whether they were being adequately met.

B. Participant Observation

DeWalt and DeWalt state that participant observation is a “method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (2002:1). The overall goal for employing participant observation in this study was to better understand, from a holistic perspective, some of the issues faced by Colombian asylum seekers. It began at the beginning of my internship and lasted throughout the entire period of fieldwork

Participant observation involved time spent at the CfR office conducting daily office activities, helping staff plan for various programs, and attending staff meetings as well as programs for clients, such as picnics, workshops, and support group meetings. Participating in these aspects allowed for an improved insight into the gamut of services offered through the Center. I also had the opportunity to attend several support group meetings with Colombian asylum seekers at a local church. My attendance and participation was instrumental in allowing me to familiarize myself with potential participants and them with me. At the first meeting, the program specialist introduced me and explained my role. I answered the few questions from asylum seekers about my research, and subsequent meetings continued as usual covering a variety of topics from questions on legal services to descriptions of a recent doctors' visit.

C. Life History Interviewing

The quantitative data and participation were useful in informing me about the general experience and needs of the center's clients. However, I chose the life history approach as my primary method because of its unique ability to offer deep insight into the individual experience and long term asylum seeker needs. Watson and Watson-Franke describe life history as, "any retrospective account by the individual of his life in whole or part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person" (1985:2). Paul Radin is considered to be the "first to use life history as a major source of information about culture," when he conducted fieldwork among the Winnebago tribe, asking one of its members, Crashing Thunder, to recount his history (1985:2-5). I used the life history method to uncover information about the lives of

asylum seekers – their experiences before after arrival in the US, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the long term needs in their new country. The life history methodology was employed so as to uncover experiences of Colombian asylum seekers from their own perspective. This *emic* approach, as Lett explains, reveals “...accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied” (1990:130).

Life history interviewing has long been a part of anthropology. While conducting life history interviews that documented the experiences of a group of mentally ill and mentally retarded men, Angrosino added that the approach, although not meant to be therapeutic in nature, has the makings of providing secondary benefits to the narrator due to ways subjects make sense of themselves and the world around them (2002:35). Other authors have also documented the therapeutic benefits of conducting life history interviews (Price 1995; Baum 1980).

According to Lamb, life stories transcend the telling of tales to involve “creative acts of self-making and culture-making” (2001:16). Through her study of widows in West Bengal, she identifies several benefits to using the life history methodology: (1) it allows for the individual to be involved in the creation of a meaningful story; (2) how the past is re-told gives the researcher a worldview into what the individual wants to make in the future (which may in turn provide valuable insight for clinicians working with torture survivors); (3) narratives go beyond focusing on how the individual processes their past but also in what the stories tell us about emerging themes from discussions (16-23).

Frank discusses Charlotte Lamb's *Life Stories: the Creation of Coherence*, as a "paradigm-setting book" about a story needing to "include an evaluation of the sequence of events [told]" (1995:145). Therefore, coherence meant having to achieve a point to a narrative. Frank further reviews another important work, *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding* by Rosenwald and Ochberg, which pushes Lamb's perspective to also include "narrative coherence [and] social practice" (147). Referencing Rosenwald and Ochberg, Frank states that life stories should be viewed as: "(1) narratives that are not representational but formative of identity; (2) that the self-formative power of personal narrative may be constrained or stunted, so that Me stories may be improved; and (3) that it is possible to enlarge the range of personal narrative to make individuals and communities aware of the political-cultural conditions that have led to the circumscription of discourse" (147).

Through my internship experience, background research, conversations with my supervisor and staff, and attendance at asylum seeker support group meetings, I was able to construct a discussion guide with a list of questions that would help guide life history interviews. I interviewed two asylum seekers over the course of four months with each participating in four interviews each. Each interview lasted anywhere between 1 ½ hours and 2 hours each and took place at their homes. All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and recorded. Interviewing at home meant participants generally had other family or friends around, however no family or friends were interviewed for this research, even though I was introduced to participants' families and warmly accepted in their lives.

Bertrand (2009) asks that we think of the subject as a member of a community, acknowledging that “the importance of collective identity clashes with our own ideas of the individualist subject... in the end it is not the individual who is telling his story to the world, but rather it is the group’s voice that is heard” (97). According to Omidian, “ethnographic research is not as dependent on sample size as other kinds of research” and stresses the importance of triangulation in order to maintain reliability and validity of data (2000:43). She suggests that issues of reliability can be mitigated by “looking at internally constructed meanings [from] observation and interaction” (43). She further cautions against viewing validity as a type of “truth,” but more descriptive of the study’s findings and conclusions, which should be cross-checked for consistency and relatedness to the research questions (44). The decision to interview two participants was made deliberately so as to uncover a rich, detailed account of experiences, as opposed to conducting depth interviews with several participants, which would have yielded a breadth of information on various factors affecting well being, but would have lacked in-depth. Angrosino’s notable study of people with mental disabilities accurately emphasizes this point from the perspective of the wealth of data retrieved (2002). He states:

“...conducting a life history interview allows me to see how people conceive of their relationships to the wider society, since, unlike a clinical interview, it is not focused on the details of one’s ‘condition,’ but on all the circumstances that have affected one’s life.... A life history interview yields an extraordinarily rich body of information that allows us to view

social problems as part of a normal flow of life and not as isolated events amenable to single, quick-fix solutions” (36).

In studying refugee lives and perceptions of health and distress, Eastmond suggests using a narrative approach in order to uncover the personal “meaning-making process” contained in the narrator’s reflections of events (2000:76). She states:

“Given the dynamics of refugee lives, narratives are a useful methodological strategy: They mirror the complex relation to time and place of refugees through their memories and storied experiences. Focusing on the individual and family or household, they provide a point of entry into the life-world of change and loss, where vital bases of social life, identity, and history located elsewhere are absent, inaccessible to both fieldworker and narrator” (76).

According to Blackman, the life history methodology is also particularly relevant in terms of where “ethnographic authority” lies and that “it has become a meaningful genre for empowering and giving voice to those who have been regarded as silent or suppressed” (1991:57). She discusses a series of projects commissioned in Alaska in order to gather the history, language and culture of eight Inupiat villages, which was more revealing using the life history approach with six villagers when compared to surveys and oral history interviews (57). The themes I discovered through participant observation at community support group meetings, private conversations with program specialists and my supervisor, as well as attendance and participation in CfR’s programs in the months prior to beginning fieldwork were very instrumental in helping further my understanding of the issues and concerns of Colombian asylum seekers.

Selecting participants for the study was done purposefully. Background research, i.e. studying the number of active clients under age 50 was a starting point in helping me identify the pool of subjects I was able to choose from. I became primarily interested in studying those under 50 because the majority of Colombian clients were between the ages of 25 and 50, with a near equal mix of males and females, and those I observed in attendance at support group meetings and other programs organized by the Center fit this age segment. Attendance at the support group meetings helped me introduce my research and ask for volunteer participation. Additionally, I anticipated not being able to avail myself of interpreter services (they were paid on a per contract basis by CfR) and therefore was limited to asylum seekers who were more familiar with English. The benefit to this type of opportunistic sampling was that it ensured that I had the participation of those who wished to voluntarily be a part of this research, as well as those who were actively participating in the Center's led programs. The drawback was that I was limited to English-speaking participants. However, since the focus of this study was on understanding the long-term needs of asylum seekers, who would likely have been living in the US for a few years, I anticipated they would have some knowledge of the English language (through exposure from taking English classes, gaining employment, etc.). Prior to beginning interviews with both my participants, they were provided with informed consent forms in English and Spanish. The consent form provided details of the benefits of the study and made note of any risks (none anticipated). Both participants were comfortable with signing the forms.

After each interview with participants, I typed a transcript of the session, including verbatim responses from participants and myself, as well as documenting any

non-verbal cues observed. Additionally, transcripts contained notes on my thoughts regarding a point made. Each transcript was organized into themes in order to best analyze findings. Further details on both participants are provided in the next chapter.

D. Document Analysis and Secondary Research

Ferraro states that, "...anthropologists do document analysis to supplement the information collected through interviewing and observation..." which may include items such as "personal diaries, newspaper records, photographs, marriage records..." and others (2006:101-102). In this research, a variety of documents were utilized in shaping the discussion guide that was eventually used in conducting the life history interviews. I studied intake notes and case worker notes to better understand some of the issues faced by my participants, and client satisfaction surveys, which revealed general feedback about the views of clients served at the CfR. During interviews with participants, and once I felt I had established rapport with them, I asked if they had any photos they would like to share from Colombia or since their arrival in the US. I was allowed to browse through a few photographs one family was able to bring with them when they fled Colombia. While I did not retain any of the photographs, they allowed the participant to quickly recall past memories and engage in conversation about his experiences and the individuals in his life. In a method called *photo elicitation*, Harper assiduously provides the definition, history and the ways in which this technique has helped researchers uncover different types of information they may not have been able to gather from answers or observed behaviors (2002:13). According to him, "the difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we

respond to these two forms of symbolic representation... [and that] images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words” (13). In this study, the photo elicitation methodology was successful in gathering data from the participant’s various life-stages (childhood, teenage years, and adulthood), as well as the incidents that stopped the taking of photos and what restarted them years later.

I also conducted secondary research on the on-going conflict in Colombia to better understand some of the experiences described by my participants. I also searched the websites and literature on other refugee resettlement programs, in order to provide me an overview of the various programs and services offered to refugees and asylum seekers.

3.3 Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are a critical part of the researcher’s world. They are, as Campbell et al. defines, “those who provide—directly or indirectly—access to key resources needed to do research” (2006: 98). In this study, two gatekeepers played a role in providing me access in the field. First and foremost was my supervisor who was an important player in introducing me to the staff at CfR and allowing me access to resources at the office, e.g., client database, notes, past client satisfaction surveys, training material, etc. The other critical gatekeeper in this study was one of the program specialists who was instrumental in introducing me and my research to potential participants. Prior to beginning fieldwork, I met with the program specialist in order to ensure this staff member understood the subject of my research, purpose and benefit to the Center. From my supervisor, I understood this program specialist to be the point of contact of many Colombian asylum

seekers. At the first Colombian support group meeting, the program specialist introduced me and explained my research to members, also allowing me to explain in greater detail and answer questions about it. The program specialist helped in ensuring I was part of the support group meetings.

3.4 Participants

At the start of my internship, the CfR serviced a total of 137 refugees and asylum seekers (67 females and 70 males) from 13 countries, most of who were from Bosnia and Colombia. Clients who seek out services from the CfR first complete an in-take questionnaire, a standardized form produced by Harvard and Johns Hopkins Universities, in order to determine if the Center can assist them and what types of services would be at their disposal. According to a program specialist, clients typically seek out help with legal services, such as assistance in completing asylum forms, or lawyer referrals for handling immigration issues. Many also contact the Center for assistance in locating English language classes in preparation for citizenship tests or to improve their employment chances. Although clients do not always ask about this directly, the Center uses their discretion in recommending mental health services to those in need.

The clients served at the CfR have been through numerous forms of debilitating torture, the most prevalent ones being death threats, psychological torture, physical torture including rape, and others. CfR's client database revealed a lack of information regarding torture experienced by Colombian asylum seekers, which my supervisor said could be due to clients not wanting to speak about torture at the time contact with the

Center was established. It has long been known that the violence in Colombia has been over a combination of drugs trafficking, land rights, and others with the involvement of right-wing paramilitary groups, leftist guerillas, military personnel, and police. The typical refugee at the CfR is someone who has had to flee their country due to torture or war, and is then entered into a country of first refuge before being admitted to the US as a refugee. The Colombian's asylum seeker experience generally differs. Those served at the CfR are generally from urban areas, come from middle class backgrounds and are educated. An asylum seeker may have experienced death threats and/or psychological stressors from guerillas or paramilitary groups that have forced him/her to flee their country. Most arrive in the US on tourist visas and then apply for asylum. According to a program specialist, the Colombian asylum seekers often have strong ties in the community and through their local churches, although they do sometimes seek out additional services through the Center. Brody states that regardless of whether the clients are refugees or asylum seekers, all have experienced various forms of upheaval in their, "interpersonal, socioeconomic, cultural-linguistic and geographic boundaries . . . [and] a significant number must make a transition from life in traditional, rural, or village cultures to that in secular, modern, and urban settings" (1994:66).

For this research, participants were allowed to choose a location in which they felt most comfortable – both participants decided on their homes. They were observed in their homes for their interaction with their physical surrounding as well as interaction with any family members or friends. Fieldwork, often dubbed as the hallmark of anthropology, was often measured by the length of time spent "in the field," which translated to a period of about a year. According to Clifford, the anthropologist in the past maintained a, "co-

residence for extended periods away from home, in the ‘tent in the village’... But it [being away for an extended period] has, in practice, been decentered” (1997:60). The scope of this research as well as the difficulty in arranging interview times around my participants’ various other obligations did not permit for long time spent in the field. This however, did not detract from the wealth of data, knowledge and understanding gained through the interviews.

3.5 Ethical and Cultural Considerations

A. Informed Consent and Language

Due to the nature of the research topic, I paid particular attention to ethical considerations and issues of confidentiality in interactions with asylum seekers as well as staff at the CfR. Prior to beginning my internship at the Center, I underwent a comprehensive training session on working with survivors of torture as well as followed all confidentiality protocols practiced at CfR. This was not always easy in practice. Towards the latter part of data collection, my supervisor insisted I turn over any audio recordings and interview notes taken during fieldwork so that select staff at the Center can get a preview of what was being said or discussed by the asylum seekers as well as analyze the data internally. The request was contrary to what was agreed upon at the onset of my research as well as what was approved by the Institutional Review Board for data storage and maintenance of confidentiality of participants. Additionally, participants were informed of their privacy during interviews, which did not involve sharing raw data material with members at CfR. After repeated discussions with my supervisor as to why I

could not hand over raw data material to the Center, as well as my role and responsibilities as a Primary Investigator, my supervisor agreed that I would maintain all data and they would not ask for it.

This research was also conducted in accordance with all policies outlined in the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) as well as American Anthropological Association (AAA). The ethical commitments outlined regarding the treatment of the population being studied was followed in all stages of this research. Support from the Center on the research study was obtained in the beginning of the internship and remained throughout the course of fieldwork and data collection. Informed consent documents were made available in both English and Spanish and obtained of all participants, disclosing any potential risks (none identified) and benefits of the research. Additionally, participants were made to understand their cooperation in the research study was strictly voluntary and they could terminate participation at any time without repercussion.

B. Researcher-Participant Relationship

Encouraging trust and rapport with participants ensures the sharing of information and success of the data gathering process. As a researcher I needed to be mindful of creating a climate that ensured participants had no unrealistic expectation about the benefits of the research or my role in conducting it. However, being a researcher also meant being cognizant of everyday ethical dilemmas or situations that might arise on any given day in the fieldwork. How would I react being asked about immigration or legal advice? What if participants confided in me concerns that were outside the scope of this

research? In conducting life history interviews, Ortiz reminds us that anthropologists are not therapists and that “illumination of human experience is the goal, not cure of the patient,” and such a methodology should be used with “respect and care” (Ortiz 1985).

According to Guillemin and Gillam, IRB committees are essential to highlighting ethical standards in social research, but “cannot help when you are in the field and difficult, unexpected situations arise” (2004:273). They suggest researchers practice the role of *reflexivity*, asking “What do I know?” and “How do I know what I know?” questions (274). It is a continuous and rigorous process that should be maintained throughout the entire lifecycle of the research including ethical issues.

Although reflexivity does not provide a step-by-step guide on how to handle any specific situation, it does ask that the reflexive researcher be acutely aware of how their research might impact participants and to anticipate the types of situations that may arise in the field. In the course of conducting my fieldwork, I had gained the trust and confidence of my participants, which led to greater sharing of information. There was an instance when I was asked about legal advice not in connection with the study. I had anticipated this would happen prior to that particular interview, and handled it with the proper care and consideration required.

3.6 Summary

In this chapter on *Research Setting & Methodology*, I detail the four types of methodologies used in gathering data for the study. Life history interviews were conducted with two Colombian asylum seekers in order to understand how the Center

could better serve this population. Due in large part to fears about their immigration status, the Center had a difficult time in reaching out to asylum seekers and client satisfaction surveys revealed little constructive information. As such, life history interviewing was seen to be the most appropriate tool to inform this study, as unlike a focus group (which would not have been appropriate when discussing difficult or personal topics) or an in-depth interview (which studies have shown can be successful at elucidating details on certain life events but often do not account for the many and often complex ways the participant relates to themselves, the events and the world around them), the life history method was useful in providing a rich, detailed portrait of how asylum seekers view their well-being. Rather than ask, “Please describe the types of programs or services you feel would best benefit you,” it is more important to take, as Jacobson describes, a “meaning-centered” approach, by way of life history interviewing to understand what emphasis asylum seekers placed on themselves, their families, the traumatic events of their past and present, as well as their future. Using this method also allowed me to immerse myself to some extent in the lives of the asylum seekers – their homes, families, and communities. Interviews were conducted at their homes, generally with other family members in the home busy with various tasks such as watching TV, napping, cooking in the kitchen, and so on. Occasionally I accompanied one participant during the interview as he walked his dog around the neighborhood, commenting about the various homes for sale and the real estate license he would someday like to get. In another interview I walked with a different participant around her neighborhood playground as she watched young parents and their children, describing fears of getting older and the difficulty and severe anxiety about making friends or meeting someone she

might like. While the life history method is not perfect for all types of qualitative inquiry, it was a very useful tool in addressing this research topic.

Another method used in this study was quantitative analysis of the client database to determine overall demographic data of the clients served at the Center, such as gender, age and national origin. From this analysis, I was able to elicit information on who were the largest number of clients as well as those who were deemed to be active participants in CfR's programs. Document analysis consisted of reviewing feedback from annual client satisfaction surveys as well as eliciting information from photographs presented to me by a participant during an interview. This method was very useful in allowing the participant to reveal memories about the various images he possessed. Finally, I also conducted secondary analysis of the conflict in Colombia as well as the general themes commonly discussed in refugee resettlement literature.

I also discuss the gate-keepers in this study and the roles they played at the Center as well as in introducing me and my research to potential participants. Identifying and forming relationships with these key individuals was crucial in opening doors for further exposure to asylum seekers. I also elaborate on the sample population as well as general information on the participant pool.

The final section of this chapter discusses ethical considerations I undertook to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of study participants as well as policy guidelines I followed by governing bodies SfAA and AAA. I also describe the role of *researcher* and *participant*, and how I handled that relationship in the field. Overall, I argue that the methods chosen, in particular the life history approach, were the most appropriate and effective for carrying out the study.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Getting Started

As described earlier, results for this study were obtained through a variety of methods, beginning with quantitative data analysis, participant observation, life history interviews and document analysis. Quantitative data analysis of the client database at CfR was instrumental in giving me basic information about the pool of clients being served at the Center, such as age, gender, nationality, and immigration status, among others. Analysis also revealed asylum seekers from Colombia were among the largest number of clients at the Center. Gatekeepers – my supervisor and program specialists, especially – provided input on some of the issues faced by this group of asylum seekers during personal conversations. From annual client satisfaction surveys I was able to draw upon some key issues described by asylum seekers about programs and services in general.

Participant observation at two community support group meetings for Colombian asylum seekers played an important role in several aspects: (1) as I was a new “face” at the meetings, it allowed me to be seen and introduced to members in attendance; (2) the program specialist organizing these meetings had built a strong bond and foundation of trust with members, based off of interactions and conversations observed between clients and the staff member, thus when I and my research was introduced, it helped lend credibility to the study and myself as the researcher; and (3) listening to discussions during the support group meeting provided an invaluable resource by way of an overview into the myriad of issues these clients face on a daily basis. I made clients aware they

could ask me questions on a one-to-one basis after the meeting ended if they did not feel comfortable speaking in a group setting. I also made them aware that any interest in participating should be made known to me after the meeting or by phone or email so as to protect their confidentiality. Several clients approached me at the end of each meeting and after answering questions about time commitments required and when assurances of confidentiality were made, two indicated their interest in participating. As expected, they appeared to be a little cautious at first to share their experiences and answer questions about any inadequacies in their resettlement needs, however after time spent interviewing each of them, the bonds created fostered a great deal of trust and safety that allowed both participants to be fully open about discussing their lives.

4.2 Participants

A. Andrés³

Andrés lived with his parents and two brothers in Medellín, one of the largest cities in Colombia. After receiving his Bachelor's degree in Economics, he joined his father and brothers in their family-owned business – a small, but successful textile factory in the city. His mother was a home-maker and as he describes, the “soul” of the family. She took care of the family, their pet dogs, the house as well as organized vacation time at their country house on weekends.

Andrés fled his city after several attacks at his family-owned business by the Colombian guerrillas. He described armed men entering his father's factory several times, terrorizing the workers and staff. They destroyed a lot of property and equipment

³ Pseudonym

when they arrived. Workers, frightened for their lives, quickly stopped coming into work. One afternoon, guerrillas came back to their factory and tied Andrés up along with his father and brothers, putting guns to their heads and threatening to kill them if they did not meet their demands. Not being able to cope any longer with living in constant fear of losing their livelihood and lives, he and his family made the decision to leave Colombia. He escaped the country with his father, mother and two brothers.

In 2000, Andrés and his family arrived in the US with literally the clothes on their backs and a few personal belongings. They entered the country on tourist visas from having made previous visits to the US, and applied for asylum within their first year of resettlement. In the six years of having lived in the US, they relocated twice within the state. Andrés' first contact with the CfR started two years ago, with the request for assistance in finding an attorney who would be able to appeal his asylum case. Since then, he has also requested referrals to mental health and healthcare professionals. At the time fieldwork commenced, he was in his early 40s⁴.

B. Laura⁵

Laura comes from a small, middle class family of four – she has one younger sister – and a large extended family on her father's side. She was a good student all throughout her schooling and college years, eventually graduating with a teaching degree. She attributes her fondness for teaching, especially young kids, to her many nephews and nieces she babysat over the years.

⁴ Actual age not revealed so as to protect his identity.

⁵ Pseudonym

The year 2002 had many highs and lows, according to Laura. It was the year she just graduated from college and was set to enter the labor force. It was also the year Laura was engaged to be married to her long-time friend and then fiancé. However, it was also the year when she, her father, mother and sister were forced to flee Colombia. Her fiancé, a teacher at the same school was killed for having opposing views to the guerrilla movements and for having organized the local community against them. Laura and her family received multiple death threats either as a result of her relationship with her fiancé or her chosen profession. She cited one reference to guerrillas arriving at her workplace but did not want to elaborate on their threats. The following evening, a group of guerrillas attacked her and her family. She was raped in the attack, her father and mother tied up and beaten. Her sister would normally have been at home but was attending an event elsewhere. Fear for her family and for herself led to the decision to leave all behind and flee to the US for a better and safer future.

The journey here was a difficult one, but through her father's connections, they were able to secure tourist visas and come to the US. They applied for asylum, had their case denied initially but then appealed the decision through an immigration attorney referred by the CfR. Laura continues to live with her family in an apartment and hopes her case will be approved soon. At the start of interviewing, Laura was in her late 20s⁶.

⁶ Actual age not revealed so as to protect her identity.

4.3 Themes

A. New Identities / Roles

For some asylum seekers, resettling in the US meant experiencing changing roles and identities. In the cases of Andrés and Laura, new roles and identities were reflected in the change of: (1) socio-economic status – comparisons made between life and earnings in Colombia versus the US; (2) employment – types of jobs available, source of income and job-searching; (3) immigration status – perceptions of self and others as an asylum seekers; (4). family structure – being head of household, taking care of elders; and (5) being an asylum seeker – perceptions of self.

As with many individuals who are forced to flee their countries and resettle in a new land, starting anew with limited financial support or ability to support themselves to the same degree they were able to in their home countries is very pronounced. While many are aware of the hardships and accept that the transition period during resettlement will be hard, the reality of it is often difficult to cope with. Andrés states:

“You were a worthwhile citizen at home [Colombia]. Now it’s hard to find anything worthwhile. I used to run our family business with my father and brothers. We were somebody there. My father was well respected. He had forty employees and they all admired him. They loved him. He was a good boss. He treated all [his] employees very well. But then we had to leave. They [guerrillas] came to the factory with guns and tied us up.... It was the last thing [straw] and we couldn’t stay there any more. I just want jobs

[that will] at least give my parents some of their dignity back like what they had in Colombia.”

For Laura, the inability to access proper employment was also a constant stressor and limitation to overall well-being. In the struggle for survival, she has had to adapt to new challenges that has redefined her identity and perceptions of self and her family:

“I liked what I did there [Colombia]. My fiancé [was the one to] introduce me to this [job]. I miss everything about it [the job, and] he’s [fiancé] is a big part of it. I was never trained [for] anything else when I came here. My family, [too]. My sister [had] just started university when we left Colombia. My mother was a housewife from when she married my father. My father, he was a teacher. When we came here, we had to find odd jobs. My father, he now works in factory assembly line [putting together machinery]. My mother knows a little better English. She [mother] works as waitress in a restaurant. She has never worked before. My sister works as a waitress in the same restaurant. She doesn’t like it but what to do? I wonder for myself and my family how we got here. Not [how we got to] the US, but how we got these jobs and how we are living like this when we had so much more [in Colombia]. We all are educated [and yet] we can’t find proper jobs. Even when we get [our approved] status, we won’t be able to get proper jobs. We don’t have enough [English] language. It will never be the same for us.”

Finding gainful employment anywhere posed great hardship as asylum seekers can only legally work once asylum is granted, which in some cases can take up to several

years before adjudication. Andrés described the hardship in trying to support himself and his family while waiting for the appeals process to be decided upon:

“People say I should open a business but I can’t – I have no status. I want to get my real estate license. I know the [housing] market is down. I want to get my LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse].... I’ve had many jobs since I came here – maintenance, shoe shine. I’ve worked at the dog track, nursing home, hospital, airport. I was also a lawn specialist. It is always hard to find a better paying job always. Now I work in the school cafeteria with my father and my brothers. We make sandwiches and everyone likes them. I take English classes in the evening two times a week and on weekends I work [a] nursing assistant job. I have to take a course to improve my English. When I get papers, I want to do [the] LPN. [It’s a] good job, better position than CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant]. I am trying to help my father with [the] CNA, too. Salary is better in healthcare, but it is more work. I go to bed midnight everyday and wake up 6:45am, even on weekends. [I just] feel so tired every time, but I have to keep doing this for me and my family.”

For Laura, the experiences in trying to obtain employment without proper status posed significant hardships. Also, needing to adjust quickly to certain aspects of the employment marketplace, such as having a certain degree of fluency in the English language also detracted from achieving overall well-being:

“I remember when I first came here; I worked at the factory with my father. My mother and my sister had a [hard] time finding jobs. But we

knew someone at the factory and he gave us those jobs. I was very thankful for something at [the very] least. It [the job] was very long [hours], but I [made] time to take English classes in the evenings so I got promoted after a few months [to work] in the office. I still work in the office doing filing, but I don't answer phone yet. But I want something more. But my English needs to be better first. Right now I don't have time or money to go back to university [and earn] a degree, but I want to apply to other jobs. I get so worried about it [the job application process]. How do I start another job when I still don't have proper status [without first] quitting my current job? If I lose my current job, what if I can't find another quickly [that] will pay me the same [salary]? I have no status. I feel I am being told [at] every step that I cannot exist [be here]. It's not my time to exist [be here].”

Waiting for their asylum cases to be approved is often a very taxing time in the lives of asylum seekers, as they find their pending status to be very limiting in being able to secure basic necessities such as jobs or formal education. Both participants described feeling marginalized and isolated not only from American society in general, but also from their neighbors, friends, colleagues and even themselves on occasion. According to Andrés:

“There are two parts to this life [as an asylum seeker]. When you have [asylum] status and when you don't. When you have status, your life is different – you are sure [of yourself], [feel] strong [about yourself], and you have your goals [you can reach]. Your entire life starts being different.

You have your life. When you have no status, everything is blocked. It's like a wall you keep hitting [every] day. You don't have [a] life. It's very unstable. You try to live [a] normal life but nothing is normal. It's a hard experience. You can't even go to school sometimes because you have no status. This year I [am] feeling a bit better. But last year it was not good. I didn't know how to talk about me and my family to my co-workers. How you explain who you are? Sometimes I [was] feeling I don't even know who I was [any]more."

Laura shares a slightly different experience. In her current life-stage, waiting for the appeals case to be approved has affected other aspects of her life beyond worries about employment. She is stressed that her past life and current status will not make her a suitable prospect in any marriage:

"The other day I [placed] a file in the wrong cabinet. My boss told me about it. I'm worried if I get fired, how [would I] find another job in my current status. It has taken so long. My family and I are trying to be patient. I want to see my sister go [back] to university, but right now money is more important. We need to survive. Having no status has affected me in so many ways. I spend all my time working and taking English classes. If my case is not approved, I don't know what I will do. I can't go back [to Colombia]. I have nothing there. I worry when I will [find] time to meet someone and get married. I want to, one day. I am going to be 29⁷ [years old]. In my family, that is considered old [to still be unmarried]. I [wonder], *'Will someone want to marry me one day? Will I*

⁷ Actual age hidden in order to protect her identity.

be considered too old? Who would want to marry me after what happened [in Colombia]?’ But I don’t have time to even think about all this. For now I have to keep working hard and helping my family. We pray to God for good news on our [asylum] case. I want my life back to normal. I want to feel normal again.”

Laura has found herself trying to cope with a family structure and dynamic different from that she knew in Colombia. Due to her ability to quickly learn English, she received a promotion and a higher paying job than the rest of her family. Her knowledge and language fluency have been an asset to her family in all aspects of their lives. She often struggles with the changed role of once being a daughter contributing to the family wealth on a supplemental basis, to now being the head of her household. She feels her situation is even more problematic because the changed hierarchy of parent-child roles and gender roles has left her wanting to ensure her father does not feel his position in the family – as father, husband, and a male – has been usurped:

“I worry about my father a lot. He was well respected [in his job in Colombia] and the man of the house. Now I earn more than anyone in my family. I also take care of them – I translate [from English to Spanish and vice versa] when we go to the grocery store, speak with [apartment] management, make doctor appointments. It’s a lot of responsibility and it keeps going up and up. I feel I have a lot to take care of and I have to take care of my family. But I worry for my father and how he’s doing mentally. One time I see him cry to my mother that he feels hopeless. I have never see him cry [before]. He is so strong, *macho*. I don’t want him to feel he’s

not man of the house [any]more. I don't want him to feel he is not important.”

Being labeled an *asylum seeker* also challenged the ways in which both participants viewed themselves and how in turn they perceived others viewing them. At times they were thought of as being *exotic*, having strong traditions and cultures, but at times the effects of the *asylum seeker* label seemed to create shifting realities of who they really were as people. Andrés states:

“The good thing here is [the ability to] socialize with native Americans. They are nice people. They want to know many things about my culture and life overseas. They [American colleagues and classmates] don't understand how you can leave everything and come here. They don't understand what [an] *asylum seeker* is. I don't like explaining *asylum seeker*. It is very difficult to speak about – not about [what happened] in Colombia, but about my life here. You know about the *balseros*? They are those people who came in a boat from Cuba. They [emigrated] illegally. My family and I came here legally. But I feel I'm like a *balseros*.”

Laura echoes similar feelings – part pride in being different and being sought after for information about her culture, and part sadness when reflecting at the new identities she and her family have had to adapt to as well as reflections on what they were forced to leave behind:

“I feel very good talking about my country, especially to Americans. They know some Latino culture already. But I don't know how to talk about being an asylum seeker. I am not reminded [of it] unless I am asked about

asylum. People ask me, “*So why don’t you get another job?*” or “*Why don’t you date?*” I tell them it’s my status, but how much to tell? It [only] reminds me that I still have no status. I have no time for anything but to be strong for my family and myself. I worry even after getting [our cases] approved, I will think of myself as asylum seeker – always hiding. Not Laura. Not Carlos⁸ (father), or Sandra⁹ (mother) or Liliana¹⁰ (sister). Not Colombia[n]. Not Colombian-American.”

B. Belonging

The theme of *Belonging* was generated from revelations by both participants on establishing trust and rapport with the people around them, finding an attachment to new identities and roles, achieving general satisfaction with life, and an unshakeable intention to stay in the country. Owning this sense of belonging begins with tapping into a variety of resources most notably a network of friends / support system, family, community, and the church in order to harness an individual’s human or social capital. It serves to provide purpose and meaning to the lives of asylum seekers. According to Andrés, several factors were critical in helping him and his family feel welcomed and integrated into society, such as having friends, the church and his family:

“Family is everything to me and the reason why I’m doing it [this job and trying hard for a better life]. My brothers and my father work in school cafeteria. I feel lucky [the] school has given [us] this opportunity. People don’t care what papers I have. They are very nice. [I am] on friendly terms

⁸ Pseudonym

⁹ Pseudonym

¹⁰ Pseudonym

with the Principal. I have friends from all over. From Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba and Puerto Rico. I meet most of them through church. Lots of them have approved applications already. We all take care of each other. It's a strong community."

Laura similarly feels she has set down some roots in her life, through developing strong friendship ties with friends and her belief that God will help her and her family through the hard times. However, her perceived lack of job security makes her constantly worried about losing her job. Says Laura:

"I don't know my neighbors too well. [But] They seem nice. I meet my friends in church and we share stories about something or sometimes what's [happening] with our cases. We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. They are very supportive.... My mother and my sister work at a family friend's restaurant. Their job[s] are more strong [secure]. My job is different. After this promotion, I feel so stress[ed] about it. What if I lose the job? How will we pay rent or buy food to eat?"

Developing a sense of belonging also meant finding an attachment to identities about self and family. Andrés' experiences of the transition from year to year has made him feel a deeper bond, connection and strength with how he views himself now and the struggles he and his family have been through together. For Laura, while the added responsibility of being the primary financial provider for the family has led to mounting stress, it has also enabled her to feel a small sense of pride in her new role. A further key element to measuring well-being for both participants is that their past experiences have contributed to optimism for the future. Says Andrés:

“You know, it used to be worse than this. After I arrived in US with my family, we were struggling. It was very, very difficult. This year, I earned the same [amount of] money as last year, but last year I worked overtime a lot. I feel being asylum seeker has taught me to be strong for my family. I cannot think anything will be worse than this. My family and me, we are very close. Everything I do, I do for us.”

Laura echoes the same:

“I’ve gone through [so much]. In Colombia and here with my family. It has changed us – I sometimes feel weak about it. I can’t do more to help myself or my family. But now I feel stronger. My family has given me so much. I feel my situation can help them. I feel blessed. I am alive, my family is alive, [and] we are in America. Asylum seekers are very strong people. I try and tell myself to be brave and I pray to God to care of us.”

Hardship faced as an asylum seeker also carries with it a toll on overall satisfaction with life in the US. According to both participants, being able to access better jobs is only one part to feeling satisfied with their lives in the new country. Not worrying about being forced back to Colombia is a major concern. Both participants acknowledge that intention to stay in the US has been helpful in cultivating a sense of belonging to the community and country they now call home. However, Andrés sometimes thinks about seeking asylum elsewhere because of difficulties in proving his case with US immigration:

“America was the only option [for resettlement]. My parents feel safe here. But sometimes I think of moving to Canada for asylum. My friends

said in Canada, when you get asylum, you are required to take English classes. It's especially designed for foreign people. The government pays for it and they process asylum [cases] faster. Here you learn English as part of a career program. But there [in Canada] they process paperwork much quicker and you learn the language right away."

Laura adds that:

"Every asylum case is different. The stories are sad. My family and I also lost a lot when we came here, but we've chosen America as our new home. We like it here. We feel safe here. Yes, there is a lot we cannot do, but we can't go back [to Colombia]. I have a friend whose husband was killed by guerrillas. She escaped and came here with her two kids. She still wants to go back to Colombia to live there. I think she feels too lonely and unhappy here. My family and I and the others try to help her – we include her when we meet, but she is not wanting to be part of life here. I feel bad, but what can I do?"

C. Legitimacy

Legitimacy is the third theme that emerged during interviews with both participants as being critical in promoting the well-being of asylum seekers during resettlement. Both participants referred to the lack of representation of asylum seekers in the media and with organizations, such as in healthcare, education and law enforcement. Additionally, *legitimacy* more directly refers to access to programs and services available

with the CfR. According to Andrés and Laura, extending legitimacy to their case as asylum seekers would be empowering. Andrés states:

“We [asylum seekers] are not the same [as refugees]. They [the media] does not say much about asylum seekers. What can we do if our cases take so long to get approved? What kinds of services can we get? I am thankful to this country and want to be a solution, not a charge to society. But how to do this? CfR has been very helpful but they need to market their services more. Lots of asylum seekers don’t know what they have.”

Laura feels the same frustrations about the struggle to gain legitimacy in the media and with organizations in general. She says:

“We are people, too. We ran out of our country to seek asylum here because we feared for our lives. I feel no one gives us importance on who we are. *“So what if your case takes a long time to approve? So what if you are denied? Go back [Don’t come back] unless you have proper status”*. I hear these all the time from my friends. It is not like my family and I and others in our status want to be a burden, but we need to know where to access services and talk with people who understand us.”

In accessing healthcare services, Andrés recounts his personal experience with the system, which is a not uncommon experience of other refugees and asylum seekers:

“Yesterday I went to the doctor. He told me I need to stay two days in hospital. I am feeling too fatigued. I don’t think it’s thyroid. Sometimes I get frustrated with healthcare because it seems like a business. You have to get referrals before you can see specialist. Even when you see the

doctor, he doesn't explain anything to me. I tell him about my experience as an asylum seeker and he listens but he is not listening and not interested."

Laura also recounts frustrations with the healthcare and mental health systems and does not know how to seek proper answers and guidance on how to navigate the system:

"Sometimes you can't reach the CfR for referrals so easily. I needed to see a psychiatrist and the CfR helped me. But there is rigorous screening just to get access to the referral. If I had status maybe it would be quicker? It is also difficult to get an appointment [with a doctor]. Too long, the wait is. I heard doctors here make lots of medical errors so which one to go to? It's so complicated.... I usually ask friends for advice on what to do, but I wish we know [got] clear instructions on what to do."

Understanding of local laws is a further area that asylum seekers could benefit from. Andrés describes an encounter he and his brothers had with local police during a fishing outing and the subsequent lack of advice he received regarding it:

"A few months ago my brothers and I went to the bay to fish. We have fished there many times [before]. There is good fish there which we bring home to cook. Then this one time, the police, they come and tell me the fish I caught is too small! They say it's illegal to catch the small fish! I never heard of this law before. I told this to the police but he gave me a citation. I asked CfR about this and they said I must pay it. They did not offer any other help. Maybe there was a lawyer I could use? Maybe I

should have wrote a letter? But anyway I paid it. So it's like these things – I feel my status limits me to services.”

Both Andrés and Laura acknowledge the CfR has been a source of information and offers good programs and services to help refugees and asylum seekers but feel there is a lot more than can be done, especially for asylum seekers. Conversations with both reveal their suspicions that program specialists may be too inundated with other cases that it is simply not possible to devote the same amount of time and effort with all individuals who contact the CfR. Additionally, because more resources may be available to refugees or asylum seekers with approved petitions, both participants feel they may not receive the same priority of service from the Center.

D. Aspirations

Aspirations is the final theme that emerged from this study. It touches upon issues of well-being as measured through ideas expressed about standards of living, adaptation of customs and cultures, participation within various facets of society and general hopes for the future. The asylum seekers I observed during community support group meetings echoed many of the same sentiments. In my final interview with Andrés, he shared with me a handful of family photos he was able to bring with him to the US – there were some from his childhood but mostly when he was a young man in his late teens and 20s. He described each photo – a family birthday, family and friends’ vacation at their country house, his father’s office at their family-owned business before the guerrilla raids, with friends outside his high school and a few baby photos. Andrés states:

“These are the things I want back for me and my family. I want us to be happy again. We were not rich in Colombia, but middle class. Maybe upper middle class. We went on family vacations every weekend to our farm [country] house. We had so many animals [there]! Horses, cows, sheep, goats. We had fifteen dogs – they kept reproducing. But this was before the guerrilla came. Then it [vacations] stopped. I think our life here is hard. We feel safe here, but life has been very hard for many years. We are doing better than some. There are good times and bad ones. I don’t expect to have same standard of life like we had in Colombia, but I think asylum [cases] need some help and guidance on what to do during the waiting period [for approval].”

As expected, Laura’s primary concerns focused on the immediate comparisons between her family’s socio-economic status in the U.S and that of Colombia:

“I thank God for my life and my family’s life here. We have been luckier than some people. But sometimes I don’t feel alive. What life is this? Am I living? I try not to compare before [guerrilla attacks] and after [fleeing to the US]. God somehow chose this path for me. Church has been very good to me and my family, so we keep hoping our approval will come soon. We want to start living again. This country is hope for me and my family, but I am still sad and anxious. I worry me and my family will not be able to buy a house one day. Right now we live in a one-bedroom apartment. All four of us.”

Andrés and Laura also expressed hopes to be able to better integrate within society in general. Andrés states:

“I just passed my English course. I am very happy. I don’t have my status yet so I can’t do LPN, but my English is better, yes? More fluent now. I can talk more with people. Even my neighbors. That neighbor’s son there always likes to come play with my dog. Now I can talk with him when he comes here. I am following English news. I know about the Governor’s race. I wrote to the Governor last week. I says to him about the hardships of asylum seekers. I spoke with his secretary – she was very nice.... I don’t know if anything will happen [on account of the letter sent], but I hope I have a voice and I hope someone hears it one day.”

For Laura and her family, their life revolves around going to work, taking English lessons and running errands. Like Andrés, she also meets up with other asylum seekers at church during community support group meetings. Finding a way to further assimilate into society means making time for a family and children:

“I don’t think about my fiancé anymore. That was in past life. But one day I would like to marry and start family. My parents will be very happy. They would love grandkids! But who would want to marry me after what happened? Each year I am becoming older. Right now I have to support my family. It is my top priority. I think with kids, I will meet more American parents. This play area near our apartment, it has lots of American families. This is our home now, so we must live our lives here. What they say about this? ‘*Do as Romans do,*’ I think. We also celebrate

all their [American] holidays – 4th of July, Thanksgiving Day. Only we don't celebrate Christmas on 25th. We celebrate on 24th. It's a big celebration. Doing all of this things is helping me and my family feel like we are people also.”

4.4 Summary and Exiting the Field

The findings from this research gathered from participant observation of community support group meetings and life story interviews with two Colombian asylum seekers demonstrate that there are major challenges to resettling this population. Andrés' and Laura's separate escape from Colombia, and resettlement transitions in the US show how deeply their experiences have affected each of them and their families, as well as shows which factors have facilitated and which detracted from perceptions of well-being. I began this research with three areas of inquiry: (1) How do Colombian asylum seekers view well-being?; (2) What factors help achieve a standard of well-being during resettlement?; and (3) What obstacles detract from well-being during resettlement? The data suggests that while asylum seekers are aware government policies limit benefits to them while extending those to refugees and those with approved asylum cases, they however indicate several areas where additional support is needed, especially from organization such as the CfR which provides programs and services to survivors of political torture regardless of immigration status. The areas of greatest need are in access to services (mental health professionals, doctors, legal information, etc.), service

providers and staff at the Center who can provide specific advice and guidance to asylum seekers.

Four themes emerged from this research that have added to the knowledge about the ways Colombian asylum seekers conceptualize well-being in general and what factors influence a positive or negative outcome in particular.

My final interviews with Andrés and Laura took place in December 2006. Applied anthropology prepares a student with many how-to's for entering the field but often gives less to the equally important phase of exiting the field. There appears to not be one single prescribed method for exiting the field, however prior to my final interviews with both participants, I had prepared them that it would be the last. As we wrapped up the interview I asked if there were any questions or concerns about anything we had discussed or that they had shared with me. There were none, but I again assured each participant of my commitments to data confidentiality and security. Andrés reflected upon how he felt I helped him improve his English and feel more confident with using the language as an indirect benefit of the interviews. Laura felt the overall experience of being listened to was the most rewarding.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

This final chapter discusses the results of the findings from this study on Colombian asylum seeker needs and perceptions of resettlement services offered through the CfR. The discussion is presented in relation to available literature, and conclusions made about its applicability to other asylum populations. This chapter also explores some of the literature surrounding issues of truth in research involving narratives or life stories of this kind. Recommendations obtained from findings as well as literature will also be presented. Finally, this chapter will address study limitations, as well as contributions to the field of applied anthropology and future research related to promoting the well-being of asylum seekers. While from a policy perspective the findings reveal there may be a need to augment asylum policies that reduce post-migration problems and provide support for asylum seekers, this chapter will focus on the improvements that can be made at a social-service organization level, which in this study is the CfR.

The four major themes that emerged from this study – *New Identities / Roles*, *Belonging*, *Legitimacy* and *Aspirations* – build upon each other and change in various ways. Post-migration, Colombian asylum seekers try to adjust to new and differentiated roles for themselves and their families. Stresses in trying to adapt to new ways of making sense of themselves, their families and their surroundings are challenging, but can also promote a sense of belonging in some, an act considered necessary to make them feel “at home.”. They have a critical need to be recognized as legitimate and valid individuals who are survivors of torture and therefore in need of a variety of basic services to help

them cope during the resettlement transition. Maintaining aspirations and goals for the future, even through critical periods, are also key elements that facilitate overall well-being; however, these take time to develop, are not sustainable at all times, and are processes that require continuous compromises to be made.

According to Healey (2006), much of the literature on asylum seekers and refugees is often said to be atheoretical. However, in an article analyzing the narratives of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, Healey uses Giddens' structuration theory as a way to conceptualize their stories. She defines structuration theory as "the interactions between the structure of society and the agency of humans within that social structure," whereby social structures (e.g., culture of that society, etc.) affect and are affected by agency (the individual's ability to act) (260). Healey also argues that "structure has an important role in explaining events. However, structures do not have independent existences; they continue only to the extent that individuals reconstruct them through their experiences of the social system and the reproduction of the structures through individual actions" (261). The use of structuration theory to analyze narratives in this thesis supports the agency-structure element of the asylum seeker experience.

Findings from this research revealed language to be a major factor for both participants, where each had agency with becoming more fluent and competent with language use. Andrés discussed how improvements with his English language skills have earned him a better job and the ability to interact with local people in his community. Laura, who was not as fluent, expressed her inability to form any type of relationship with her neighbors but has the desire to become more fluent so that she can interact more freely at work and in her neighborhood. Healey explains that "language is both an agency

and a structural force as the means between which individuals and society communicate” (264). Both participants had various perceived levels of agency and coping mechanisms that they practiced in order to deal with and navigate various structural forces. As a way of coping, whenever they experienced a loss or reduction in agency, they attempted to re-establish themselves within the structure of society. Narratives of resilience, the position of the church/religion in their lives, navigating negative media perceptions of asylum seekers, and maintaining aspirations for an improved future are various examples of how agency and structure relate in order to explain the experiences of asylum seekers.

5.1 Discussion

A. New Identities / Roles

Forced migration poses severe challenges to individuals’ identity and how they make sense of the world around them. There are many factors that affect issues of identity creation and change. This study demonstrates the primary influencers that affect well-being in Colombian asylum seekers: 1) change in socio-economic status; 2) types of jobs available; 3) immigration status limitations; 4) upheaval in family structure and roles within the family; and 5) what it means to be labeled an “asylum seeker.” Both participants described feelings of sadness, anxiety and worries about their families, employment, and their asylum applications. Narratives also alluded to a lack of sense of purpose and frustrations with not being in control of their lives at times, all of which are consistent with existing literature on trauma experienced by survivors of torture. Perceptions of being labeled an “asylum seeker” were constantly shifting and changing,

at one time arousing feelings of despair, anger and loss, and at other times feelings of hope, strength and pride in being different and needed in some capacity (e.g. when being sought after for information on their country, culture, etc.).

Economic disruption places severe hardship on these individuals and is one of the most studied issues in refugee resettlement literature generally. Those who are able to find employment typically work low-paying, low-skilled, non-professional jobs even if they worked in a professional capacity prior to migration (Forbes 1985). Haines describes the experience of “downward occupational mobility,” where refugees are forced to accept whatever type of employment they can get even if it is below their experience or skill level (1996:43). However, employment, and more importantly, achieving economic self-sufficiency, are often cited as major drivers in increasing emotional and social well-being as well as empowering newly resettled immigrants.

Being labeled an “asylum seeker” offers hope for those survivors of torture who have fled their countries for a safer place, but can often be a problematic label, especially for those who have lengthier wait periods for their cases to be adjudicated. Unlike refugees who are granted certain immigration benefits upon their arrival, asylum seekers often have no more than their physical beings and want to be released of the label as soon as possible so they can focus on re-building their lives (Rajaram 2002). Findings suggest that some counteract negative associations with the label by being “Latino” or “Colombian” or “foreign.” Forging this type of collective identity is a source of empowerment that often compensates for one that makes them feel they have low or no status (Colic-Peisker & Walker 2003; Davies & Harré 1991).

Another critical vulnerability factor affecting overall well-being is poor or

reduced English language proficiency. Some research indicates that English language proficiency was found predictive of depression in the long term only (more than ten years) while others state that poor English language skills contribute to psychological vulnerability as early as during the first year of resettlement (Beiser & Hou 2001; Blair 2000). Findings from this study detail the stress of lacking language ability and its effects on daily living. Scholars have documented feelings of marginalization, discrimination and anxiety among refugees lacking sufficient language proficiency (Hyman et al. 2000). However, study participants also spoke of how improved language ability over time increased participant's chances of getting better jobs, and also how the newly acquired knowledge affected perceptions of self and roles within family structures.

B. Belonging

There are numerous studies that highlight the challenges asylum seekers face and the types of strategies they employ to try and manage adverse impact on their overall well-being (Douglas 2010; Vanderhurst 2007; Clarke and Garner 2010; Kibreab 1999; Grove and Zwi 2006). Findings from this study show Colombian asylum seekers' attempts at building social networks through participation in English language classes, their workplaces as well as through attendance at church services and events. Additionally, although they sometimes struggle with new identities and roles, they claim it is a necessary to accept these identities as part of the resettlement process so that they can focus on more fully integrating into society and establishing more normalcies in their lives.

Numerous research studies have documented the importance of community and social networks in advancing the health and well-being during resettlement (Guruge & Khanlou 2004; Werner 1993). Key players in social networks often include family, friends, colleagues and neighbors, who are often viewed in terms of an extended family system. Citing Woolcock, Leow, Goldstein and McGlinchy states:

“Such social networks with high social capital can become a protective mechanism against social isolation, offering better education, community life and safety.... Immigrants who find themselves outside of these established immigrant communities and who are not fully integrated into their non-immigrant community of residence, often experience social isolation. Social isolation is among the strongest predictors of poor health and is shown to be a risk factor for substance abuse and mental disorders such as depression” (2006:8).

In another study that supports the linkage between a lack of social support networks and traumatic stress, Warner revealed that “Q'eqchi' refugee women with weak natal kin social support networks reported greater feelings of distress and symptoms of traumatic stress than did women with strong networks” (2007:193).

Another finding that came out of *Belonging* is the belief that increased language proficiency would mean greater integration in local communities. However Warriner cautions that “English-language proficiency does not always translate into economic self-sufficiency or social mobility, even though proficiency in English is considered one of the primary components of membership and often equated with patriotism, national identity, and a “rightful” place in society” (2007:344).

C. Legitimacy

Findings from this theme demonstrate the frustrations and anxiety experienced by asylum seekers in being recognized as being people – similar to refugees in their reasons for migrating to a new country, but different in how they were processed upon arrival. Participants feel the lack of having any formal status in the interim while they wait for their pending asylum cases to be adjudicated has severe effects on their well-being, and portrays them as disingenuous or damaged. It has affected how they receive services, how service providers view them and how they view themselves. Fassin describes asylum policies that have become increasingly restrictive in recent decades as new criteria for asylum claims became more prevalent (2005). As such, “asylum seekers were increasingly identified as illegal immigrants and therefore candidates for expulsion, unless humanitarian reasons could be found to re-qualify them as victims deserving sympathy” (362). Similarly, Inda and Rosaldo state that “political asylum [today] has essentially lost much of its legitimacy and asylum seekers are viewed with deep suspicion” (2008:32). In a poignant essay on unauthorized migration, Coutin provides us with a detailed look into the social reality of this population (2005:195). She states:

“Unauthorized migrants who are en route to the United States have to make themselves absent from the spaces they occupy. When they become clandestine, such migrants embody illegality; in some cases, they literally “go underground”.... Because their presence is prohibited, unauthorized migrants do not fully arrive even when they reach their destinations” (195).

Called “hypervisible,” Tyler states that asylum seekers are often portrayed as “fictional, dehumanized... figure[s]” in popular media, and often included in discourses on “illegal immigrants,” “foreign workers” or “migrant workers” (2006:185).

While very little can be done to effect policy changes to the asylum system as a whole in the immediate future, I have made recommendations in the next section on how to mitigate feelings of hopelessness and unimportance. It is also evident from the data that fear of deportation or detention may be preventing some from approaching the Center with questions or help with services.

D. Aspirations

This is the final theme gathered from the narratives which both participants say is needed in order to positively impact well-being. *Aspirations* build upon the preceding theme and are interwoven with conceptions of identity and group membership / belonging. It also serves to lay a foundation for further integration into American society by way of empowering asylum seekers through keeping goals, dreams and hopes for a better future, and is often a measurement used in the struggle of being excluded or included in society.

E. Issues of Truth in Narratives

The most significant and self-evident point about both participants who shared their life histories in this research are that there appeared to be no one single “authentic” voice about their experiences, identities or historical memory. How these participants experienced their lives depended upon what point in life they were at, and how they

reflected upon changes in their lives. Narrative truth, as Linde explains, borrowing from Labov's definition, "is concerned with personal experience and thus is taken to be a representation of an actual occurrence" (1993:68).

There is significant research surrounding issues of truth in narrative and life story studies, both acknowledging the ways in which narrative truth can be established as well as misuses of the narrative methodology for personal/political gain (Bowlin & Stromberg 1997; Watson 1973; Angrosino 2008). Linde suggests that life stories should be viewed as texts, and that "rather than making claims about the existence and nature of raw facts... [we must assume] that all we can ever work with are texts of one sort or the other" (1993:14).

5.2 Recommendations

From an asylum system perspective, there is a critical need to address asylum policy and its employment laws, plus application processing times and guidelines on the asylum system in order to alleviate feelings of further despair, trauma and dependence on state funds for individuals and families who are forced to flee their homes. However, any policy-focused recommendation at this level is unlikely to yield results in the short term.

From the perspective of agencies, such as the CfR, that service refugees and asylum seekers, the findings from this research suggest that while some of the support provided to survivors of torture generally may be sufficient, there is room for improvement in programs and services offered for asylum seekers. It should be noted that although further research with Colombian asylum seekers will be necessary in order to

assess recommendations are applicable to the population of Colombian asylum seeker experience more generally. I developed the list below based on findings gathered from this study (and taking into consideration budgetary limitations at the organization level), which I believe could significantly and positively impact well-being of Colombian asylum seekers:

1. Introduce vocational training and job placement programs that would cater towards Colombian asylum seekers with limited English language skills, as well as provide resources to assist individuals with licensing and certification needs (e.g. real estate license, nursing assistant, and so on).
2. Develop brochures in Spanish that clearly explain a myriad of topics Colombian asylum seekers might encounter during the resettlement process, covering issues such as health care, mental health, legal services, local laws, and community / neighborhood programs. The written material should act as a how-to guide on life in the city.
3. Improve access to English as a Second Language (ESL) courses for Colombian asylum seekers, taking into consideration the variances within this population (such as working adult, children, older parents, etc.).
4. Implement monthly gatherings designed for Colombian asylum seekers, bearing in mind that not all asylum seekers may participate in “support group” type meetings. This should be a social activity where the asylum seekers would decide and lead on topics discussed or in organizing events, thereby fostering empowerment and maximizing available social networks.

5. Encourage Colombian asylum seekers to participate in the many facets of American society (such as neighborhood picnics and attendance at sporting events) in order to help them better assimilate and recover confidence and self-esteem.
6. All staff and professionals working with asylum seekers should be offered training on how to service asylum seekers, making special note that this population is different from refugees in very fundamental ways.
7. Reassure asylum seekers of the commitment of the Center to better serve their needs as well as educate them on the variety of services available.

5.3 Study Limitations

While this study attempted to address the research questions as thoroughly and holistically as possible, there are nonetheless limitations on the study. Most critically, while the findings provided a wealth of information about Colombian asylum seeker experiences, further research with a larger sample size of Colombian asylum seekers is necessary in order to determine how or if the experiences of those interviewed in this research match or differ with others. In striving to answer questions about the well-being of Colombian asylum seekers and ways in which the Center can better address them, this study's design focused specifically on perceptions of the asylum seekers themselves. This is important in providing a general overview of the "insider" perspective of some members of the Colombian asylum seeker community, and lends credibility to the study by providing a "native" or "authentic" voice to the experiences. However, more

comprehensive results could be gained by including perspectives from other Colombian and non-Colombian asylum seekers in order to explore any differences and similarities with the finding from this study.

From a sampling perspective, I was also limited to interviewing participants who had at least intermediate knowledge of English. Usage of interpreters would be necessary to include a wider participant pool in the research.

Methodologically, the life history approach proved to be a very valuable tool in eliciting rich narratives from participants; however it should be noted that this method can only work at its optimum with the establishment of trust and rapport. Due to the nature of the topic discussed, it would be essential to establish and maintain a very high level of trust and rapport with any future study participants.

5.4 Future Research

Future research is necessary to continue building upon the existing body of knowledge on resettlement experiences of asylum seekers as well as their perceptions of well-being. Specifically, studies on the long term effects on asylum seekers who have lengthy wait times for their cases to be adjudicated should be investigated in more depth. Employment adaptation is a major concern among this population. Further research is necessary to understand the link between employment, socio-economic status and language ability among asylum seekers. Existing research also tends to focus on the individual's mental health and the interventions available to them. However, as this study and several others have shown, an individual's support system (family, friends,

colleagues, neighbors, etc.) are major factors that have positive impact on psycho-social adjustment. Therefore, it would be beneficial to study asylum seeker support networks in order to better understand well-being.

This ethnographic study using a life history methodology was successful in obtaining a detailed, rich perspective of the Colombian asylum seeker experience post-migration and the major factors affecting and promoting their well-being. The approach allowed for a deeper exploration into the experiences of asylum seekers through the narratives of those most affected by the experience. Additionally, findings uncovered can be used for future research in order to increase the overall knowledge base of asylum seeker experience.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Arrival in the US – How? When? How did you find accommodations?
2. Demographics & family background – Age? Marital status? Education? Children? Parents? Family structure? Friends? Closest family member / friend?
3. Colombia – Story before you came to the US? Where you were born? Grew up? Life? Family? Do you miss Colombia? What do you miss / don't miss? Would you go back?
4. Settlement expectations – What did you expect? What is your average day? Comparison with Colombia? Satisfaction levels? Concerns? Language? Jobs? Housing? Transportation? Mobility? Health? Mental health? Legal?
5. Religion / Values – Do you belong to church / other organizations? How often meet friends? Food you eat / make? For how many people? Where grocery shopping?
6. Male – Female Roles / Child – Parent Roles / Bread-winner / Home-maker Roles / Employee – Employer Roles – What relationship do you have with your environment?
7. Role of CfR – Types of services received? Evaluation?
8. Future plans – What? Why? How? Describe yourself today? How different from last year? When you first arrived? What is the most important to change your condition, i.e. a situation? person? characteristic? words? What makes you happy?