

Alfredo Lopez

Colombian refugees in New Zealand and their resettlement stories

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de> .

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Imprint:

Copyright © 2018 GRIN Verlag
ISBN: 9783668963504

This book at GRIN:

<https://www.grin.com/document/470263>

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Colombian refugees in New Zealand and their resettlement stories

By

Alfredo José López Severiche

A thesis submitted to the Department of Communication
Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of International Communication

Unitec Institute of Technology

Auckland New Zealand

May 2018

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the stories of resettlement and integration of Colombian refugees in New Zealand. Colombian refugees began their resettlement in New Zealand in 2007 referred by the UNHCR and accepted by the government of New Zealand. The lack of academic research focused solely on Colombian refugees in New Zealand was the main motivation to carry out this study. This research aims to explore the challenges that affect the successful integration of Colombian refugees in New Zealand. It was driven by a pragmatic question of what can be done to improve their integration in New Zealand.

The qualitative methodological approach of this study was an ethnographic collection of oral stories. Ethnography and oral history research methodology were the most effective way of documenting the experiences of Colombian refugees in New Zealand because it permitted me to collect and present the stories of the participants in a chronological order. Additional data collection methods included focus group and participants' diaries. This study collected the resettlement stories of 13 former Colombian refugees resettled in New Zealand.

The findings of this research indicated that former Colombian refugees are integrated into New Zealand. However, some of them are better integrated and adapted than others, but all of them feel love and much appreciation for New Zealand. In fact, Colombian refugees consider New Zealand as their second home and also identify themselves as Colombians, Ecuadorians and Kiwis. Nevertheless, they think that New Zealand has several shortcomings in its refugee resettlement programme. The findings of this study also show that Colombian refugees in New

Zealand face many challenges that put in risk their successful integration into the country.

This thesis contributes new knowledge about the resettlement of Colombian refugees in New Zealand and suggests ways to improve the resettlement of new refugees in the country. It opens the door for conducting new studies on refugees and immigrants in New Zealand and worldwide.

Keywords: *Colombian Refugees, resettlement, integration, resettlement challenges, discrimination, resignation, reconciliation, exiles.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I want to express my gratefulness to the heavenly God who gave me strength and health to carry out this research project.

Secondly, I would like to thank Dr Elena Kolesova, my main supervisor for all her support she gave me during the entire duration of the execution of this research project. Also, for all valuable time, she spent checking my writings and giving me advice on how to improve these writings.

I am also deeply grateful to my second supervisor, Dr Philip Cass, who motivated me to continue with this study and was willing to give me practical suggestions to improve the quality of this research.

Likewise, I would like to thank Associate Professor Dr Evangelia Papoutsaki, who helped me to set up the groundwork for initiating this research project. Also, for transmitting valuable information to me in her research methods class that gave me the necessary tools to start this project.

Thanks also to Dr Jocelyn Williams, who provided me with very valuable suggestions during my master's studies about how to improve my writing.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Unitec and especially to the Department of Communication Studies for accepting me in the Master of International Communication programme with my academic background in Information Technology. Finally, I thank the 13 participants who volunteered to participate in this project and for receiving me hospitably at their homes to conduct the interviews.

Dedication

I want to dedicate this thesis (in which I have spent more than 2500 hours of hard work) in memory of all refugees who have lost their lives in an attempt to reach another country such as the three-year-old boy named Aylan Kurdi, who was found dead on a beach in Turkey; after his ship was shipwrecked in the Mediterranean on September 2, 2015.

I would also like to dedicate this research to all internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, refugees and former refugees from all over the world. For me, these people are the most vulnerable and helpless beings in the world.

Finally, I mainly want to dedicate this work to the God of heaven, who gave me health and life to carry out this study. Without the help of God, it would not have been possible to do this work that is why I want to give him the merit. "Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (Philippians 4:20).

Table of content

ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
Dedication	iv
Table of content	v
List of Tables	ix
List of Abbreviations	x
CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Research	2
1.2.1 Main Objective:	2
1.2.2 Aims or secondary objectives:	3
1.3 Research Question	3
1.3.1 Sub-questions	3
1.4 Definition of Concepts	4
1.4.1 Refugee	4
1.4.2 Resettlement	6
1.4.3 Integration	6
1.4.4 Resignation	7
1.4.5 Reconciliation	9
1.5 Thesis outline	10
CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND CONTEXT	12
2.1 The Causes that force Colombian people to leave their homes	12
2.2 Arrival in Ecuador and preparation to travel to New Zealand	16
2.3 Arrival in New Zealand	21
CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW	23
3.1 Introduction	23
3.2 Preparation of refugees for resettlement in New Zealand	23
3.3 Challenges faced by refugees when resettling in New Zealand	27
3.3.1 Discrimination	29
3.3.2 Mental health issues	32
3.3.3 The lack of English	34
3.3.4 Unemployment	35
3.4 The importance of reconciliation during the integration process	38

3.5 Resignation: a necessary quality for integrating into New Zealand society	41
3.6 Conclusion.....	44
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS	46
4.1 Introduction.....	46
4.2 Methodology	46
4.3 Methods of data collection	48
4.4 Oral history interviews.....	48
4.5 Focus groups	51
4.6 Diaries/Journals.....	53
4.7 Sampling and Recruitment.....	56
4.7.1 Additional information about transcriptions and translations	58
4.8 Procedures of qualitative data analysis.....	60
4.8.1 Stage one: Transcribing and sorting data	61
4.8.2 Stage two: Coding data	61
4.8.3 Stage three: Integrating information and looking for meaning	62
4.8.4 Stage four: Interpreting data	62
4.8.5 Stage five: Drawing conclusions	62
4.9 Trustworthiness and Credibility.....	63
4.9.1 Adoption of appropriate, well-recognised research methods	64
4.9.2 Triangulation	64
4.9.3 Tactics to help ensure honesty from informants when contributing data	64
4.9.4 Examination of previous research findings	65
4.10 Ethical Considerations.....	65
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS.....	68
5.1 Introduction.....	68
5.2 The participants, their profiles and stories	69
5.2.1 Henry	70
5.2.2 Sara	70
5.2.3 Rebeca	71
5.2.4 Magdalena	71
5.2.5 Alekos	72
5.2.6 Mateo	72
5.2.7 Arturo.....	73
5.2.8 Teresa	74
5.2.9 Ramona.....	74
5.2.10 Claudia	75

5.2.11 Marta	75
5.2.12 Mariana.....	75
5.2.13 Laura	76
5.3 The emergent themes	76
5.4 Theme 1: Living in Colombia.....	77
5.4.1 Sub-theme 1a: Life in Colombia before becoming a victim of the armed conflict	77
5.4.2 Sub-theme 1b: Living conditions before escaping from Colombia.....	80
5.5 Theme 2: Living in Ecuador	83
5.5.1 Sub-theme 2a: Arriving in Ecuador	83
5.5.2 Sub-theme 2b: Living conditions in Ecuador	87
5.5.3 Sub-theme 2c: The asylum process in Ecuador	90
5.5.4 Sub-theme 2d: The process of re-settling in New Zealand.....	93
5.5.5 Sub-theme 2e: Previous preparation to come to New Zealand	96
5.6 Theme 3: Resettlement in New Zealand	99
5.6.1 Sub-theme 3a: The first six weeks in New Zealand.....	99
5.6.2 Sub-theme 3b: Preparation in the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre.	103
5.6.3 Sub-theme 3c: Settlement into the community.....	105
5.6.4 Sub-theme 3d: Relationships with others in the community	107
5.6.5 Sub-theme 3e: Living conditions in the community.....	111
5.7 Theme 4: Integration process into New Zealand society.....	113
5.7.1 Sub-theme 4a: The challenges of integration.....	114
5.7.2 Sub-theme 4b: Feelings about New Zealand.....	117
5.7.3 Sub-theme 4c: Reconciliation and resignation.....	119
5.7.4 Sub-theme 4d: Identity	123
5.7.5 Sub-theme 4e: Resilience	125
5.8 Theme 5: Appropriate support for refugees	130
5.8.1 Sub-theme 5a: Support in the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre	130
5.8.2 Sub-theme 5b: Support by WINZ.....	134
5.8.3 Sub-theme 5c: Support by Housing New Zealand Corporation	137
5.8.4 Sub-theme 5d: Support for employment	139
5.8.5 Sub-theme 5e: Support for education	142
5.9 Theme 6: The refugee term	144
5.9.1 Sub-theme 6a: Wrong use of the refugee term	144
5.9.2 Sub-theme 6b: Discrimination associated with the refugee term.....	147
5.10 Conclusion	150

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION	152
6.1 Introduction.....	152
6.2 Theme 1: Living in Colombia	152
6.3 Theme 2: Living in Ecuador	156
6.4 Theme 3: Resettlement in New Zealand	162
6.5 Theme 4: Integration process into New Zealand society.....	166
6.6 Theme 5: Appropriate support to refugees.....	172
6.7 Theme 6: The refugee term.....	174
6.8 Conclusion.....	178
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION	181
7.1 Introduction.....	181
7.2 Answering the research questions	181
7.2.1 Sub-question 1: <i>How were Colombian refugees prepared for resettlement in New Zealand?</i>	182
7.2.2 Sub-question 2: <i>What are the challenges faced by Colombian refugees when resettling in New Zealand?</i>	183
7.2.3 Sub-question 3: <i>What role does reconciliation play in the process of integration in New Zealand?</i>	185
7.2.4 Sub-question 4: <i>How do Colombian refugees resign or reconcile themselves to integrate into New Zealand in order to rebuild their lives and survive?</i>	186
7.2.5 Research Question: <i>What is the experience of Colombian Refugees resettlement in New Zealand?</i>	187
7.3 Study Limitations.....	189
7.4 Recommendation for future research	190
References.....	192
APPENDIX A: Questions for the oral history interviews	209
APPENDIX B: Questions for the focus group discussions.....	213
APPENDIX C: Advertisement for the Study	214
APPENDIX D: Original codes.....	215

List of Tables

Table 1. Per Capita Resettlement by Country of Resettlement in 2015	19
Table 2. Recruited participants in the study.	57
Table 3. Additional information about participants.	57
Table 4. Steps implemented to obtain the ethical approval	66
Table 5. participants' introduction and participation in the study.	69
Table 6. Employment statistics.....	140

List of Abbreviations

AUC:	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
ACNUR:	Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados
ALAC:	Auckland Latin American Community
ARCC:	Auckland Resettled Community Coalition
CONARE:	Comisión Nacional Para Los Refugiados de Argentina
CONARE:	Comisión Nacional Para Los Refugiados de Brazil
HIAS:	Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
HNZC:	Housing New Zealand Corporation
MSD:	Ministry of Social Development
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
OAU:	Organisation of African Unity
OIM:	International Organization for Migration
PTSD:	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RAE:	Real Academia Española
RNZ:	Radio New Zealand
UN:	United Nations
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WFP:	World Food Programme
WINZ:	Work and Income New Zealand

CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

This research focuses on Colombian refugees and their resettlement and integration stories in New Zealand. According to New Zealand Immigration (2016), Colombian refugees have been arriving in the country since 2007. By the end of July 2016, New Zealand had 809 Colombian refugees resettled from Ecuador where they were recognised as urban refugees by the Ecuadorian government (Ministry of Health, 2012). An urban refugee is a refugee who lives in an urban area rather than in a refugee camp. It is important to note that in Ecuador there are no refugee camps. Therefore, all refugees in Ecuador are considered as urban refugees. Thousands of Colombians have fled from Colombia to Ecuador because of the armed conflict that the country has faced for almost six decades. Once recognised as refugees in Ecuador, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) makes the recommendation or referral of some refugees to the New Zealand government, for them to be resettled in New Zealand.

This research collected the experiences of 13 Colombian refugees in their process of resettlement and integration in New Zealand. The study used a qualitative methodological approach of an oral history methodology (ethnographic-a collection of oral stories). As data collection methods, I have used oral history interviews, a focus group and participants' personal diaries.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Research

This research project explores the challenges that affect the integration of Colombian refugees in New Zealand. It is driven by a pragmatic question of what can be done to improve their integration in New Zealand. The literature research has identified a significant gap in the research about Colombian refugees in New Zealand.

Although there has been some research on Colombian refugees in New Zealand, some information is not accurate. For example, according to the Ministry of Health (2012) “refugees from Colombia have been arriving in New Zealand since 2008” (p. 33). In fact, according to The Refugee and Protection Unit (2017), 29 Colombian refugees arrived in New Zealand between 2007 to 2008; one participant in this study affirms that she arrived in New Zealand in 2007 with other Colombian refugees.

As a former Colombian refugee who arrived in New Zealand from Ecuador in 2008 and my own experience of (re)settling in New Zealand society, I am uniquely positioned to present an insider’s view on the struggles and challenges faced by my compatriots.

1.2.1 Main Objective:

The aims and objective of this research project are:

- To explore the challenges that affect the integration of Colombian refugees in New Zealand.

1.2.2 Aims or secondary objectives:

- To explore in depth, the stories and experiences of Colombian refugees in their process of resettlement and integration in New Zealand.
- To explore what can be done in order to improve the integration of Colombian refugees in New Zealand.
- To contribute to the development of research on Colombian refugees in New Zealand as one of the 30 refugee groups in New Zealand.
- To assist new refugees in New Zealand with integration into the country by producing knowledge that can help refugee organisations and local communities where refugees are settled to better understand their needs.
- To contribute reliable and credible research for academic and refugee organisations.
- Finally, to identify gaps in the knowledge and identify new research areas.

1.3 Research Question

What is the experience of Colombian Refugees resettlement in New Zealand?

1.3.1 Sub-questions

- 1- How were Colombian refugees prepared for resettlement in New Zealand?
- 2- What are the challenges faced by Colombian refugees when resettling in New Zealand?

- 3- What role does reconciliation play in the process of integration in New Zealand?
- 4- How do Colombian refugees resign or reconcile themselves to integrating into New Zealand society in order to rebuild their lives and survive?

1.4 Definition of Concepts

This study constantly uses the following terms: Refugee, resettlement, integration, resignation and reconciliation, which are defined here.

1.4.1 Refugee

Article I of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, defines the term 'refugee' as follows:

A person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (p. 14)

Likewise, the 1969 OAU (Organisation of African Unity) Convention in Article I (2) declares the next:

The term "refugee" shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his [or her] country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his [or her] place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his [or her] country of origin or nationality. (p.6)

In addition, in Article III (3) of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees says that:

[...] the refugee definition or concept of a refugee to be recommended for use in the region is one which, in addition to

containing the elements of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, includes among refugee's persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression. (p. 6)

A refugee is not an asylum-seeker or an economic migrant (UNHCR, 2016). For example, a migrant chooses which country he/she wants to go to and prepares himself carefully for the trip. Migrants prepare emotionally for the change they will face in the new country and prepare their travel documents. Migrants plan their move. Refugees do not choose to leave their home countries (UNHCR, 2016). They have to flee from their countries in order to save their lives. Refugees do not move to a foreign country following a plan. They do not have time to prepare themselves for a trip and for this reason many of them have no travel documents. Hence, migrants and refugees' departure conditions are different. Another difference between refugees and migrants is that refugees are specifically defined and protected by international laws (UNHCR, 2016).

When refugees obtain permanent residence in a country, technically they are no longer refugees, especially when they are resettled in a third country like New Zealand (Rebekah, 2013). In this research, I use the term *refugees* to refer to Colombians from refugee backgrounds. Normally, these people are called *former refugees* by those who have more knowledge about the refugees' topic. However, the majority continue to call them refugees, due to either ignorance or discrimination. Research and experience have led me to believe that even when a refugee is granted foreign residence or citizenship, this fact does not put a real end to their

refugee status. It could be argued that the refugee status of an adult ends completely only when they return to live permanently in their country of origin, otherwise, they will always be considered a refugee in a foreign land. For instance, as already explained, members of the mainstream society often continue to call them refugees. This is as if the person had a mark or a label that identifies them as refugees during the entire time they live in the foreign country.

1.4.2 Resettlement

Resettlement in a third country means that refugees leave the country that has accepted them as refugees, to become legally established in another country. According to Bävman (2016) “resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grants them permanent settlement” (para. 2). Resettlement is not a right of refugees; instead, it is a solution that applies only in specific situations. Even if a person is recognised as a refugee by a country that does not necessarily mean that this person has a case with the required characteristics for resettlement to a third country (ACNUR, 2011).

1.4.3 Integration

Integration occurs when a community or a group of people is willing to receive another person outside the group as part of it. In this way, the person is attached to this group or community and starts becoming part of it (ACNUR, 2002). Integration is a process that is dynamic in two ways

(Strang & Ager, 2010). For example, both the hosting community and the resettled refugees must work reciprocally on the integration of newly arrived refugees (Strang & Ager, 2010). This raises questions about who should adapt to whom; if refugees should adapt to their host communities or whether communities should adapt to refugees. The answer to this is that both have to take part in this process of adaptation and develop mutual understanding (Strang & Ager, 2010). The refugee must be willing to adapt to the new country, by learning aspects such as its language and culture. In turn, the host society should be willing to help refugees with their integration process, including areas like preparation for employment and self-sufficiency. This study explores what Colombian refugees have done in order to adapt and be part of their communities.

1.4.4 Resignation

Resignation means accepting with submission to something inescapable (Resignation, 2011). When a refugee is resettled into a third country he/she might experience the symptoms of culture shock such as stress, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, idealising the home culture, irritability, resentment, family conflicts, loss of identity, feelings of inadequacy and insecurity and negative self-image (Foley, 2012). According to Pedersen (1995), there are five stages of culture shock, which are: the honeymoon stage, the disintegration stage, the reintegration stage, the autonomy stage and the interdependence stage (Pedersen, 1995). In the last stage of culture shock, refugees accept their new life in the new

country. It could be said that in this way, the refugees resign themselves to rebuilding their lives in the resettlement country.

My own experience as a former Colombian refugee resettled in New Zealand from Ecuador has taught me that resignation and reconciliation are the keys to successful integration. I lived in Ecuador for 14 months as an urban refugee and never adapted and integrated into the Ecuadorian culture. The Ecuadorian and Colombian cultures are similar and share the same Spanish language, but even so, I did not achieve integration in that country; instead, I kept comparing Ecuador with Colombia in a negative way. The attitude I adopted made me realise just the adverse aspects of Ecuador; for that reason, I used to feel a lot of resentment and rage at the bad things that I saw and experienced in Ecuador. I simply felt disappointment in that country. I rejected Ecuadorian culture from the bottom of my heart, which prevented me from integrating. On the other hand, if I had reconciled myself to Ecuadorian culture, I could have accepted Ecuador as my new home and perhaps I would have resigned myself to rebuilding my life in that country. Similarly, when I came to New Zealand I had to wait three years to be reconciled with the new culture and resign myself to rebuilding my life in this country. In some moments I still feel like going back to my country, but having accepted New Zealand as my new home allows me to continue rebuilding my life.

Refugees never choose the country of their relocation. Therefore, once in the country of resettlement, the refugees might feel that they do not like the country to which they have arrived. It is at this point that the