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Resilience: The key for Colombian refugees to integrate into New Zealand

Resiliencia: La clave para que los refugiados colombianos logren integrarse en Nueva Zelanda

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Abstract

Objective: This study explores the role of resilience in facilitating the integration of Colombian refugees in New Zealand. Due to the lack of research on this specific population in New Zealand, this study was conducted to address the gap in academic literature. **Methodology:** This study used ethnography and oral history as its methodological approaches, conducting 12 oral history interviews with the participants. Additionally, four participants presented written personal diaries, resulting in a total of 13 Colombian refugees participating in the study. **Findings:** The findings showed that resilience has been the key factor enabling Colombian refugees to achieve successful integration in New Zealand. **Conclusion:** This study demonstrates how resilience has been instrumental in empowering Colombian refugees to navigate and overcome the challenges of integration in the country, including lack of English proficiency, mental health problems, discrimination, and unemployment.

Keywords: Colombian refugees, Resilience, Integration, New Zealand.

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Resumen

Objetivo: Este estudio investigó cómo la resiliencia ayuda a los refugiados colombianos a lograr su integración en Nueva Zelanda. La falta de investigación sobre los refugiados colombianos en Nueva Zelanda fue una motivación para realizar este estudio y llenar el vacío existente en la literatura académica. **Metodología:** Esta investigación empleó la etnografía y la historia oral como enfoques metodológicos. Además, se realizaron 12 entrevistas de historia oral con los participantes. También se llevó a cabo un grupo focal, y cuatro participantes presentaron diarios personales escritos; en total 13 colombianos participaron en este estudio. **Hallazgos:** La investigación mostró que la resiliencia ha sido la clave que ha ayudado a los refugiados colombianos a lograr la integración en Nueva Zelanda. **Conclusión:** Gracias a la resiliencia los refugiados colombianos han superado los retos de integración en el país, que son principalmente la falta de inglés, problemas de salud mental, discriminación y desempleo.

Palabras clave: Refugiados colombianos, resiliencia, integración, Nueva Zelanda.

Introduction

Since 2007, New Zealand has been receiving Colombian refugees who previously sought refuge in Ecuador. These refugees fled from Colombia due to the war and armed conflict that has persisted for the last 60 years. The conflict involved clashes between Marxist and Leninist idealist groups, aspiring to establish a communist government, and right-wing paramilitary groups opposing the guerrillas. As a result of this protracted conflict, almost half a million Colombians have become refugees scattered across various countries worldwide, with Ecuador accommodating around 200,000 Colombian refugees.

Upon their arrival in Ecuador, Colombian refugees had to leave all their belongings in their homeland. Starting afresh in Ecuador, being away from the horrors of the Colombian armed conflict proved challenging as they fight against the traumas caused by the war in their country. These traumas led to feelings of sadness, depression, and much nostalgia for leaving behind their country of origin as well as their family and friends. Moreover, Colombian refugees in Ecuador have to face social discrimination and economic challenges, making integration for Colombian refugees in Ecuador very difficult. Consequently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recommended the resettlement of some refugees in New Zealand, offering them a chance at a better quality of life.

Once resettled in New Zealand, Colombian refugees experienced an improved quality of life. However, they continued to face mental health problems, discrimination, language barriers, and unemployment, posing risks to their successful integration into New Zealand. Despite these challenges, over time, these resilient individuals managed to develop inner strength, allowing them to overcome the challenges of living in New Zealand and adapt to their new environment. This resilience also fostered a sense of acceptance and belonging. It encouraged them to embrace New Zealand as their new country and endeavor to rebuild their lives there.

Rationale for the Current Research

Until now, little research has been conducted on Colombian refugees in New Zealand¹. Existing literature reveals a lack of academic studies regarding the resettlement of Colombian refugees in New Zealand. Despite Colombian refugees residing in New Zealand for over 15 years, no articles have been published specifically on the resilience demonstrated by these refugees in both Ecuador and New Zealand. Therefore, this pilot study aims to explore the stories of 13 Colombian refugees in New Zealand, investigating how they displayed resilience during their resettlement and integration process in New Zealand. One of the primary objectives is to contribute to the research on Colombian refugees in New Zealand and to support the country's refugee organizations with their resettlement and integration programs. To address this, our research question is as follows:

How does resilience manifest in the resettlement and integration process of Colombian refugees in New Zealand?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study revolves primarily around literature about resilience. According to [Lim and Han \(2016\)](#), resilience “is associated with successful adaptation and refers to one's ability to effectively adapt to stress caused by serious trauma or adversity” (p. 167). Similarly, [Brand and Jax \(2007\)](#), affirm that resilience is “the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political, and environmental change” (p. 3). Therefore, resilience can be considered an internal force that helps people overcome extremely challenging situations ([Lenette et al., 2012](#)). It allows individuals to adapt to new life circumstances and survive challenging situations. For instance, resilience can aid in overcoming the pain of losing a loved one in death ([Ssenyonga, Owen, & Olema, 2013](#)) or help refugees recover from various traumatic experiences and lead a normal life ([Ssenyonga et al., 2013](#)). This is because a multitude of these refugees who had been victims of terrible wars had affected their mental health. ([Kent et al., 2014](#); [Lenette et al., 2012](#); [Ssenyonga et al., 2013](#); [Swaroop & DeLoach, 2015](#)).

Numerous studies have explored the mental health problems and resilience among refugees worldwide ([Bonanno et al., 2011](#); [Darychuk & Jackson, 2015](#); [Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016](#); [Kent, Davis & Reich, 2014](#); [Lenette et al., 2012](#); [Lim & Han, 2016](#); [Nam et al., 2016](#); [Palacio et al., 1999](#); [Puvimanasinghe et al., 2015](#); [Riley & Masten, 2005](#); [Sherwood & Liebling-Kalifani, 2012](#); [Sleijpen et al., 2013](#); [Slobodin & de Jong, 2015](#); [Swaroop & Deloach, 2015](#); [Tippen, 2016](#)). These studies highlight that many refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and need to develop resilience to overcome this mental health problem. [The National Institute of Mental Health \(2016\)](#) defines PTSD as “a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event” (p. 1). Common symptoms include bad dreams; racing heart and sweating; reliving the trauma

¹ As it is a pilot study, this research uses and cites old literature from relevant research that has been carried out in New Zealand.

over and over (flashbacks); and frightening thoughts of PTSD (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016).

The PTSD experienced by refugees is often connected with their traumas. As Shapiro (2014) explains, "The word 'trauma' is derived from the Greek word that means 'wound.' Trauma is a 'psychological injury' that can be caused by several situations" (p. 3). Similarly, McCann and Pearlman (1990) argue that an experience is psychologically traumatic if it is: 1) is sudden, unexpected, or non-normative; 2) exceeds the individual's perceived ability to meet its demand; and 3) disrupts the individual's frame of reference and other central psychological needs and related schemes (p. 10).

Despite the traumatic experience and PTSD faced by many refugees, overcoming and/or coping with these challenges are crucial for successful adaptation and integration in the host country (Ssenyonga et al., 2013). Several studies have shown that resilience has played a significant role in helping refugees achieve successful integration in their countries of refuge (King, et al., 1998; Lenette et al., 2012; Lim & Han 2016; Palacio et al., 1999).

Methodology

In this study, we used two qualitative methodological approaches: oral history and ethnography. Oral history is a commonly used quantitative research method that involves collecting participants' life stories and documenting them in audio or video format. This method allows for a chronological presentation of narrated stories, providing a comprehensive understanding of their biographies (Haynes, 2006; Yow, 2005). With this in mind, this study included 13 oral stories of the participants. The stories were about their life histories chronologically, from their life in Colombia to their resettlement in New Zealand. Additionally, we used ethnography as a methodological approach. "Ethnography is a qualitative approach in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group" (Revell, 12, p. 65). This approach the researcher to understand, describe, and interpret a way of life from the perspective of the participants" (O'Leary (2014; 2004), p. 133).

The oral history and ethnography methodology implemented in this research was an effective way of documenting the stories and experiences of Colombian refugees in New Zealand because it permitted me to collect and present the experiences of the participants in chronological order that provided a better understanding of each story. As previously mentioned, this study focused on exploring how resilience helped Colombian refugees to successfully integrate into New Zealand. For this purpose, the methodology already explained was selected. This methodology was appropriate because it allowed the participants to express themselves freely about their life experiences in both Ecuador and New Zealand, and in this way be they were able to analyze how much they had achieved integration in the host country thanks to resilience.

Data Sources

This qualitative study used three data collection methods, oral history interviews, a focus group, and diaries or journals. Those methods are explained below.

Semistructured Oral History Interviews

Twelve semistructured oral history interviews were conducted in the homes of participants in Hamilton, New Zealand. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, the participant's mother tongue. They had an average duration of 54 min. The interviews were recorded on audio, transcribed, and translated into English, with the help of a professional translator verifying that the interviews had been translated correctly from Spanish to English. During the interviews, the participants felt completely comfortable and relaxed. Thus, they were able to express their thoughts and ideas freely. Additionally, participants received a copy of the interview questionnaire more than 10 days before the interview. Hence, they had enough time to review the questions and refresh their memory concerning the events of their lives, which they would be report in the oral history interviews. It is worth mentioning that all the participants decided to participate voluntarily, and they signed a consent form as proof. Additionally, for ethical reasons, they chose a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Focus Group

The study also used the formation of a focus group as the second method of data collection for this research. This focus group consisted of three participants that involved two women and one man. The session lasted over an hour and was conducted in Spanish. Subsequently, this collective interview was transcribed and translated into English. Notably, the participants were happy to relate their life experiences while conducting the focus group. The objective of the focus group was to notice the interaction between the participants. In turn, this helped determine their level of integration into the Colombian community and New Zealand. Also, the goal was to add more ideas to the 12 conducted interviews. Before forming the focus group, the participants were informed about the focus group procedures, the purpose of the research, the duration of the meeting, the agreement consent form, and the future use of the data collection. The three focus group participants shared valuable information for the development of this study. The researcher served as the meeting moderator.

Diaries or Journals

Diaries or journals were the third data source we employed in this study. The purpose of the diaries was to determine the level of integration of the participants in New Zealand. For this, participants would have to write for 40 days a small portion of information about their daily activities and also about their feelings and satisfaction of living in New Zealand. In this way, those data contributed to determining the resilience level of the participants. Therefore, four participants presented their written diaries that were very helpful in determining the level of integration of these people in New Zealand. The diaries were written in Spanish and were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis.

Participants

As stated earlier, 13 Colombian refugees took part in this study; four men and nine women. The average age of the participants was 45 years; the youngest was 21 years and the oldest was 67 years. The criteria for selecting the participants included the following:

- 1) Being a Colombian refugee.

- 2) Being recognized as a refugee in Ecuador.
- 3) Being resettled in New Zealand from Ecuador.
- 4) Older than 18 years.

Voluntary sampling, which involves recruiting participants in qualitative studies, was used to recruit participants. In addition, voluntary sampling “involves selecting a sample by asking for volunteers. For example, by putting an ad in the newspaper or going to local organizations such as schools or community groups” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 190). When recruiting participants, we designed and distributed flyers among the Colombian community to promote their voluntary participation in this research project. In this way, the first 13 participants who offered to participate and met the requirements were selected.

Table 1.
Participants in the study.

Participants’ numbers	Gender	Age
1	M	67
2	F	37
3	F	50
4	F	22
5	M	56
6	M	27
7	M	60
8	F	43
9	F	21
10	F	42
11	F	65
12	F	50
13	F	45

Data Analysis

This study performed Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA). According to Taylor and Gibbs (2010), “QDA is the range of processes and procedures whereby one moves from the qualitative data that have been collected into some form of explanation, understanding, or interpretation of the people and situations one is investigating” (p. 5). Likewise, O’Leary, (2004) states that “QDA involves the use of inductive (discovering) and/or deductive (uncovering) reasoning to generate and interpret relevant themes to achieve meaningful understanding” (p. 195). This study used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was employed in qualitative studies for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data produced by research (Calliou, 2004; Fernandez, 2016). Thus, our thematic analysis techniques include the following procedures: 1) collecting data, 2) transcribing and sorting data, 3) coding data, 4) integrating information and looking for meaning in all of the data,

5) interpreting data, and 6) drawing conclusions (Calliou, 2004; Fernandez, 2016). Using the described analysis method, it was easy to find patterns that allowed the creation of 10 codes and to summarize them into two main themes that include 1) resilience while living in Ecuador and 2) challenges in New Zealand.

Findings

The findings of this study emerged as a result of the previously mentioned thematic analysis. In other words, the findings of this study were the result of the thematic analysis of the interviews, the focus group, and the diaries written by the participants. Therefore, as previously described above, the two themes that emerged from this thematic analysis were: 1) resilience while living in Ecuador and 2) challenges in New Zealand. The findings described below show what the difference is for refugees having lived in Ecuador and New Zealand. The first theme showed the living conditions of Colombian refugees in Ecuador. In that country, Colombian refugees had to face social and racial discrimination as well as economic challenges. These challenges made integration more difficult for Colombian refugees in Ecuador. Theme two described the challenges faced by Colombian refugees once in New Zealand, such as the lack of English proficiency, mental health problems, discrimination, and unemployment. The findings showed that Colombian refugees manifested resilience in their lives in both countries, and that resilience was the key for them to integrate into New Zealand society.

Resilience while Living in Ecuador

Ecuador is the major country where many Colombians fled to in search of international protection. Upon arriving in Ecuador, Colombian refugees started a new life away from the Colombian armed conflict. However, this was not easy because most Colombian refugees faced extensive discrimination in Ecuador. Although Colombia and Ecuador are considered brother countries with shared cultural features such as language, there are significant differences in accent meals, music, and traditions. Furthermore, the Ecuadorian economy is less developed than that of the Colombian; due to this unemployment abounds there. These aspects made integration more complex for Colombian refugees in Ecuador. Nevertheless, the primary aim of these refugees was to live in peace in Ecuador. This was revealed by a participant's comment who said,

“We traveled to Ecuador with great hope, seeking refuge after experiencing violence in Colombia and losing everything. Our primary goal was to find peace and tranquility in Ecuador, and not just seek refuge from the government, but also to find inner peace and solace. Above all, what interested me the most was finding that sense of calm and harmony” (Participant 1).

In Ecuador, most of the participants hoped to find peace and tranquility that they had not found in Colombia. However, they enjoyed some calm but did not find complete peace of mind. To explain, many of them were afraid that they would encounter combatants from the Colombian armed conflict posing as refugees in Ecuador. In this way, they feared being found and probably killed by their persecutors. In fact, it was discovered that some Colombian refugees were killed in Ecuador. This made them feel more insecure.

Discrimination is another challenge that affects the peace of mind of Colombian refugees in Ecuador. Consequently, to know the level of discrimination faced by Colombian refugees in Ecuador, we asked participants the following question: In Ecuador, did you face discrimination because you are a Colombian refugee?

A 60 year old participant said,

“Actually, yes; most times, they treat us badly with vulgar, contemptuous, and humiliating words. I came to Ecuador for safety and protection, and I have no complaints from the state, but I do have a lot of complaints from the people because they are discriminative. Ecuadorians call the Colombians the worst. One is worthless in Ecuador. While in Colombia, we see many Ecuadorians working different jobs and do not discriminate against them; on the contrary, we support them; but they treat us in the opposite way in Ecuador” (Participant 7).

In the same vein, a 26 year old participant states,

“Yes, honestly yes. I believe that Ecuador is one of the countries that do not like Colombians. Merely from hearing my accent, people label me as a thief, murderer, and criminal. I once worked with a man who lent money, and when I was going to collect my employer’s money, people discriminated against me. As a victim of this discrimination, I felt deeply upset but chose not to voice my feelings. However, things escalated one day, the owner of the restaurant where I worked made a diminishing remark about Colombians, stating that they are criminals who deserved to be burned alive and deported to their country. His offensive statement made me angry, prompting me to engage in an argument with him” (Participant 6).

The kind of discrimination faced by Colombian refugees in Ecuador is manifested in various aspects of society. For instance, a 43 year old female participant shared that her eldest son endured physical abuse from a teacher at school. The teacher baselessly labeled all Colombians in Ecuador as drug traffickers, thieves, murderers, and criminals. Furthermore, the teacher made derogatory remarks about Colombian women, calling them prostitutes. Similarly, another 42 year old participant recounts her experiences of discrimination while she went shopping. Many times, shopkeepers would refuse to sell to her once they realized she was Colombian, using excuses like the store being out of stock, even though the products were visibly available, and the shopkeeper will tell her that they do not sell any products to Colombians. Likewise, other Colombians faced discrimination when attempting to rent a room or find employment. Many Ecuadorians were unwilling to rent rooms to Colombians; employers often hesitated to hire them, citing a lack of trustworthiness as a reason. Even when some Colombians were hired, they often received inadequate or no salary at all.

Interestingly, back in Colombia, the participants did not encounter social and racial discrimination, but they were victims of violence, which is why they sought refuge in Ecuador, hoping to find the peace they had experienced in Colombia. However, upon arrival in Ecuador, they faced severe discrimination. That is to say, in both countries, they had to face different challenges that put their peace of mind at risk. Correspondingly, in Ecuador,

the participants encountered serious economic challenges. One 22 year old participant vividly recalls and describes her economic situation when she arrived in Ecuador,

“My first impressions when I arrived in Ecuador were far from positive. As we arrived at the house my mother had rented, I was disheartened to see it empty, with only mattresses on the floor. Despite the lack of material possessions, my mother reassured us not to worry, emphasizing that we would overcome this challenge as resilient fighters capable of enduring tough times. When I remember those words, I feel like crying. because they serve as a powerful source of motivation, spurring me to fight and strive to progress in life” (Participant 4).

In the same vein, another participant shares her challenging economic situation in Ecuador as follows,

“My living conditions were extremely challenging due to financial constraints, but I was fortunate to have a supportive friend from Colombia who helped me out. She guided me and assisted me in obtaining food on credit from a local store. Later, I was offered a job at a store selling clothes. My employer kindly allowed me and my son to sleep in the kitchen until I could afford to rent my place. To make ends meet, I had to work seven days a week. Unfortunately, my salary at that time was barely enough to cover our daily lunch that I had to share with my son, and to provide a mattress for us to sleep on the kitchen floor. I worked like a slave in that store because I felt that a person who works seven days a week for just daily lunch and hosting is a slave. However, I had no choice. The daily lunch and the place to sleep were the only benefits I could gain from working seven days a week in that store selling clothes” (Participant 2).

Most of the participants reported facing economic challenges in Ecuador, especially at the time of arrival in the country. One participant recalled, “Life in Ecuador was extremely tough at first; we arrived with nothing and had to sleep in a wagon train for many weeks in unbearable heat. The food was also very poor.” The discrimination they encountered in Ecuador further complicated their efforts to improve their economic situation, as it made finding employment/jobs difficult. These cumulative problems left the participants feeling worried, sad, and depressed. However, despite these severe hardships, they developed resilience that provided the strength to persevere in Ecuador rather than considering returning to Colombia. Thus, participants were asked the following question: Did you ever think about returning to Colombia while in Ecuador? A 65 year old participant responded,

“No, I did not think of returning to Colombia because the danger was great for my family and I. Returning to Colombia would have put us in danger. It was a very difficult decision for me because it was like having my heart divided, as part of my family lived with me in Ecuador while another part remained in Colombia. I always believed that going back to Colombia would expose us to death” (Participant 11).

Likewise, another participant expresses a similar sentiment saying,

“No, the thought of returning never crossed my mind due to the situation in Colombia. We believed that going back would only complicate our lives further compared to the challenges we already faced in Ecuador. So, I chose to stay in Ecuador” (Participant 9).

One of the Colombian women refugees affirms,

“No, I never thought of returning to Colombia because I have always seen myself as an enterprising woman, a fighter, and someone ready to overcome challenges. I was determined to overcome the challenges in Ecuador and never give up on my goal to move forward with my children” (Participant 8).

However, a participant responded in contrast with the other response by saying,

“Yes, several times I was tempted to return to Colombia, but unfortunately, with everything that had happened to me in Colombia, it was not a viable option. I had to resign myself to find another place or solution, as returning to Colombia would not have been a wise decision. I received threatening messages from guerrilla organizations, leaving my family and me as military targets. Our lives would be in danger there if we were to go back, so staying away from Colombia was the best choice” (Participant 1).

Clearly, the life experiences of Colombian refugees in Ecuador were challenging. Despite the difficulties they faced, they displayed great determination to rebuild their lives in Ecuador, and refrained from returning to Colombia that put their safety at risk. Their ability to move ahead in Ecuador is evidence of their resilience that aligns with the concept described by [Lenette et al. \(2012\)](#). According to these authors, "resilience refers to an individual's psychological capability to overcome, learn from, and positively adapt to adverse events in life" (p. 638). What was said by [Lenette et al. \(2012\)](#) is reflected by the participants in Ecuador. Therefore, it can be seen that Colombian refugees were able to deploy resilience while living in Ecuador. In this sense, they were able to lead a normal life and were willing to continue striving to adapt in Ecuador. This positive and perseverant attitude aligns with the definitions of resilience found in the existing literature ([Kent et al., 2014](#); [Lenette et al., 2012](#); [Ssenyonga, Owens, & Olema 2013](#); [Swaroop & DeLoach 2015](#)).

Challenges in New Zealand

In this study, all the participants expressed their willingness to continue living in Ecuador and not return to Colombia. However, they were dissatisfied with the discrimination experienced in Ecuador. Their delight was evident when they were selected by UNHCR to be resettled in New Zealand, as they imagined a better quality of life once they arrived. They thought that obtaining a job in New Zealand would be easy, enabling them to be self-sufficient, and they hoped to escape the discrimination they faced. However, upon arriving, the participants discovered that refugees arriving in New Zealand have to face various challenges. Several research studies show that the main challenges experienced by refugees in New Zealand are the lack of English proficiency, mental health problems, discrimination, unemployment, lack of social network or friends, difficulty getting recognition for overseas qualifications, and lack of New Zealand work experience ([Beaglehole, 1988](#); [Butcher et al., 2006](#); [Change Makers Refugee Forum, 2012](#); [Chile, 2007](#); [Department of Labour, 2004](#); [Frost, 2015](#); [Hayward, 2011](#); [Hylan, 1997](#); [Liev, 2008](#); [Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2012](#); [Ministry of Social Development, 2008](#); [Mohamed 2011](#); [Nash et al., 2004](#); [New Zealand Immigration, 2016](#); [Pio, 2010](#); [Revell, 2012](#); [Sanchez, 2016](#); [Thomas y McKenzie, 2005](#); [Treen, 2013](#); [Yor, 2016](#)).

Lack of English Proficiency

The lack of English proficiency posed a significant challenge for refugees upon arriving in New Zealand (Butcher et al., 2006; Department of Labour, 2004; Mohamed 2011; Sanchez, 2016; Yor, 2016). Participants emphasized that this language barrier initially made communication difficult with people in New Zealand. For instance, one participant who had been living in New Zealand for nine years, still struggled with elementary English. To overcome this challenge, she often relied on her children as interpreters during appointments at “Work and Income” offices as well as when dealing with letters from the same organization. Despite her language barrier, the Colombian refugee said that her lack of English proficiency has not been a barrier to developing friendships with New Zealanders, and enjoys fun moments with them. She also maintained close ties with her children's friends.

Similarly, a 56 year old Colombian refugee faced the same challenges of integration without understanding English. During his initial six weeks in New Zealand at the refugee center in Mangere, communication with the staff proved difficult. After resettlement in Hamilton, he continued to struggle with the lack of English proficiency, leading to feelings of frustration, depression, and a desire to return to Ecuador because he could not communicate with other people in the community. Moreover, he felt irritated and did not want to hear people speak English to him, a language he could not understand. He remembers that in those moments of rage, he would walk alone through the streets of the neighborhood trying to distract his mind and overcome this challenge. Despite considering returning to Ecuador, where he had good friends and no difficulty communicating with the people of that country, he decided to talk to his family and express his desire to return to Ecuador, but his family motivated him to continue living with them in New Zealand because financial constraints was also a factor that would have prevented him from buying a flight ticket, as stated by Colombian refugee. It was observed that the lack of English proficiency severely affected the emotional state of this Colombian, to the extent that he was willing to abandon his wife and three children to go back to Ecuador.

Considering the two aforesaid stories regarding the lack of English proficiency of the Colombian refugees resettled in New Zealand, most participants shared a similar opinion on the lack of English proficiency as a significant barrier to their integration into the country. They emphasized that this language barrier negatively affected their ability to make friends and find employment, stating that it would be helpful for refugees to learn English before coming to New Zealand. Thus, proposing that learning English should be part of the preparation for refugees before traveling to New Zealand as this might reduce the impact that the lack of English proficiency creates on the refugees that enter the country. Therefore, Colombian refugees encourage new refugees to have patience and strive to learn English. One participant said,

“Finally, my recommendation to newcomers is to have a lot of patience when it comes to learning the language and adapting to the new environment. It is not an easy process, they need to endure and be patient until they fully adapt. This may take three, four, or five years; it is not something that happens overnight. Even those of us who have been here for almost eight years are still struggling to integrate further into the country. Therefore, my advice is to be patient throughout this journey.” (Participant 1).

Another participant suggested,

“My advice would be for newcomers to start studying English from the moment they arrive in the country in order to find a suitable job. It is essential to remain calm, observe, and analyze the environment. Always remember that each person progresses at their own pace, so it is not wise to compare your journey of progress with others. Also, as an employee, do not let anyone take advantage of you” (Participant 13).

Another Colombian refugee advised, “I would tell them (new refugees) to be very patient because learning English is not easy” (Participant 3).

Mental health problems

Several studies revealed that mental health problems were common among refugees globally. (Bonanno et al., 2011; Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016; Kent, Davis & Reich, 2014; Lenette et al., 2012; Lim & Han, 2016; Liev, 2008; Mitschke et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2011; Nam et al., 2016; Palacio et al., 1999; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2015; Sleijpen et al., 2013; Slobodin & de Jong, 2015; Swaroop & Deloach, 2015; Tippen, 2016). Consequently, it is not surprising that Colombian refugees in New Zealand also faced such problems. Among them, the most common mental health problems found in Colombian refugees in New Zealand were nostalgia, sadness, and depression. For example, a Colombian woman expressed her feelings of nostalgia,

“I miss my culture as people are more openminded and welcoming. In the afternoon, people would come and sit in front of their houses and exchange greetings with neighbors on the street who passed by them, while the children played on the pathway. However, here on the street where I reside, I do not know the names of my neighbors. Whenever they pass in front of me, they seem to intentionally pretend not to see me, as if I am invisible” (Participant 2).

Another Colombian woman expressed her sadness and depression with the following heartfelt words,

“I am not happy in this country. I try to survive, just as I did in Ecuador, but unlike there, I am not happy here. It feels like this country hinders progress and keeps one at the lowest level. Deception seems to be the norm, and there is no real future for someone like me. The system seems designed to exploit individuals until they can no longer contribute, and then they’re merely kept alive with medication until death. That is the kind of life I see in this country” (Participant 12).

During the interview with Participant 12, she said she felt calm and comfortable with the interview, but as the interview progressed, her demeanor shifted to one of annoyance and depression due to the challenging situation she was experiencing in New Zealand. Her responses were loud and filled with anger. She attributed them to her deep sadness and frustration with her living conditions in the country. She highlighted several difficulties she faced since she arrived in New Zealand, including language barriers, unemployment, and being subjected to labor, and social exploitation within the system. Moreover, she expressed experiencing discrimination from her coworkers at her place of work. These challenges contributed to her overwhelming dissatisfaction with her life in New Zealand. As a refugee,

she wanted to be able to return to Colombia. According to her, “In New Zealand, there is no future for refugees.”

Other Colombian refugees shared that they have had moments of profound sadness, often leading to tears, either because they miss their country of origin or the haunting memories of the war they experienced in Colombia. These accounts of mental health problems among Colombian refugees in New Zealand align with existing research conducted on the mental well-being of refugees (Bonanno et al., 2011; Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016; Kent, Davis & Reich, 2014; Lenette et al., 2012; Lim & Han, 2016; Liev, 2008; Mitschke et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2011; Nam et al., 2016; Palacio et al., 1999; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2015; Riley, Sherwood & Liebling-Kalifani, 2012; Sleijpen et al., 2013; Slobodin & de Jong, 2015; Swaroop & Deloach, 2015; Tippen, 2016).

Discrimination

Discrimination was another challenge that refugees dealt with in New Zealand (Beaglehole, 1988; Butcher, Spoonley & Trlin, 2006; Department of Labour, 2004; Ministry of Social Development, 2008; Revell, 2012; Treen, 2013; Yor, 2016). One participant shared that she faced a lot of discrimination in New Zealand for being a refugee. She said,

“I remember a conversation with a Kiwi guy that left me deeply surprised. He told me, “You refugees never change. No matter how hard you work or study, you will always be refugees. Your traumas and problems will forever hold you back, preventing you from moving forward or cease to be refugees.” I was taken aback by his words and I asked him to repeat what he had said because I thought maybe I had misunderstood him, but he repeated the exact words. He was convinced that the traumas carried by refugees hinder personal growth and progress. However, I firmly disagree with his viewpoint. I believe that a person’s ability to succeed and progress in life is not determined by their refugee status but by their determination and resilience. In Colombia, I fought hard to escape the challenges, and in Ecuador, I endured hardship to ensure my survival and progress. Now, in New Zealand, I continue to face obstacles and persevere. The struggles I have overcome and my ability to adapt to different countries serve as evidence that refugees can indeed overcome obstacles and thrive. Moreover, I have seen documentaries featuring immigrants in English-speaking countries such as the United States and Australia, wherein language proficiency did not hinder them from securing jobs and succeeding. However, here in New Zealand, I have experienced discrimination based on language skills, where not speaking perfect English is equated with being unintelligent and results in employment barriers. This form of discrimination has deeply affected me.” (Participant 2)

Unfortunately, Participant 2’s experience with discrimination due to her refugee status in New Zealand was common. She believed that merely being a refugee made her a target of discrimination. Many other participants in this study shared her sentiment, and there was a general consensus among them. One refugee woman affirmed that fellow Colombian immigrants also viewed Colombian refugees as inferior individuals. Other participants disclosed their experiences of discrimination solely because they were Colombians. For example, a young Colombian refugee mentioned how some colleagues at work unfairly associated him with drug addiction simply because he was Colombian. These findings are

consistent with other research that has been conducted in New Zealand that indicates that discrimination against refugees in New Zealand is one of the challenges refugees encounter (Beaglehole, 1988; Butcher, Spoonley & Trlin, 2006; Department of Labour, 2004; Ministry of Social Development, 2008; Revell 2012; Treen, 2013; Yor, 2016).

Unemployment

Unemployment is another significant challenge faced by refugees in New Zealand and most countries (Crea, Loughry, O'Halloran, & Flannery, 2016; Department of Labour, 2004; Feeney, 2000; Frost, 2015; Lyon, Sepulveda & Syrett, 2007, Ministry of Social Development, 2008; Pahud 2008; Phillimore & Goodso, 2006; Tomlinson & Egan 2002; Yor 2016). The participants in this study also attest to the fact that unemployment is one of the most significant challenges that refugees encountered in New Zealand. Research conducted by the Ministry of Social Development (2008), highlights that many refugees struggle to get a job in New Zealand due to their lack of fluent English with a Kiwi accent. Additionally, the research reveals that the lack of work experience in New Zealand also poses a barrier to obtaining a job. Furthermore, the lack of qualifications becomes another obstacle for refugees seeking employment. The findings of this study align with the research conducted by the Ministry of Social Development (2008). Colombian refugees in the study express that their limited English proficiency hinders their ability to secure jobs in New Zealand. While some refugees gain work experience through volunteer opportunities or taking any available job, they still find it challenging to obtain self-sufficient employment. As a result, the majority of Colombian refugees remain dependent on government-provided social welfare.

Discussion and conclusions

Some similarities and differences experienced by Colombian refugees in Ecuador and New Zealand are shown in the findings. For example, in Ecuador, the participants faced many problems of discrimination and unemployment. In New Zealand, participants experienced the same problems. However, in New Zealand, Colombian refugees enjoyed a better socioeconomic position, as the government provided them with financial assistance to cover their basic needs. While in Ecuador, they did not have this type of financial aid. Additionally, in Ecuador, discrimination against Colombians was very marked, while in New Zealand, discrimination against participants was less frequent.

It can be said that despite the challenges faced by Colombian refugees in Ecuador and New Zealand, they have managed to adapt and integrate into the community. In other words, Colombian refugees have rebuilt their lives in New Zealand, overcoming their traumas from the past to achieve this. Additionally, they have displayed a willingness to confront and overcome challenges they face in their daily life, making the most of their opportunities in the country. As stated above, despite the challenges they face, Colombian refugees in New Zealand have shown a strong determination to rebuild their lives, adapt to their surroundings, and contribute positively to their host communities. The attitude of Colombian refugees to the challenges already examined in this research shows their ability to face challenges with resilience.

Evidently, the lack of English proficiency can indeed pose significant challenges for refugees in New Zealand, as it can impact their ability to communicate effectively, and fully integrate into the community. However, the Colombian refugees in this study have demonstrated remarkable resilience by not allowing this language barrier to intimidate or prevent them from continuing to lead a normal life in New Zealand. The example of a 60 year old Colombian refugee who affirmed that his lack of advanced English has not prevented him from making Kiwi friends and socializing with them is a testament to his adaptability and determination, stating that he had 15 Kiwi girlfriends in Hamilton. Similarly, other Colombian refugees share the sentiment that the lack of English had not been a hindrance in their ability to work and communicate with others in New Zealand. It can be said then that the aforementioned were examples of resilience displayed by the Colombian refugees in New Zealand.

Indeed, Colombian refugees in New Zealand face mental health problems during their resettlement. They experience moments of sadness and depression. However, this study reveals that despite these challenges, they were able to display resilience and determination. There is no denying the fact that some of them still felt moments of sadness and even depression. Despite those feelings, they were willing to continue rebuilding their lives in this country. In fact, they are very glad to live in New Zealand. The words of one of these refugees demonstrate this,

“I learned to love this country because, truthfully, it has offered us immense support. Welcoming us with open arms, like a caring mother embracing her abandoned children, which is how I felt. This nation has been a source of comfort. Other refugee states: I love New Zealand because this country has been a blessing to my family and me. My love for New Zealand knows no bounds.”

Despite acknowledging flaws in refugee aid, another refugee expressed a profound love for New Zealand,

“The initial challenges were incredibly tough and often hard, but now, I have learned to love New Zealand. New Zealand is perceived as a highly commendable and generous nation, and there is immense gratitude for all it has offered. The desire to contribute even more to the country is strong. To facilitate better integration and prevent sole reliance on government assistance, the refugees require support from the government. Improved social programs are necessary to achieve this goal.” (Participant 1)

The fact that Colombian refugees found happiness in living in New Zealand, despite all the challenges stated above, served as evidence of the resilience they demonstrated throughout the resettlement and integration process in New Zealand. This observation aligns with findings from the literature reviewed in this article. According to [Lim and Han \(2016\)](#), resilience “is associated with successful adaptation and refers to one's capability to adapt effectively to stress caused by serious trauma or adversity” (p. 167). Similarly, [Brand and Jax \(2007\)](#) state that resilience is “the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political, and, environmental changes” (p. 3). Thus, it becomes evident that despite the traumas and challenges faced in Colombia, Ecuador, and New Zealand, Colombian refugees have managed to integrate successfully, and academic literature attributes this integration to their resilience.

Summary

This study explored how resilience manifested in the resettlement and integration process of Colombian refugees in New Zealand. For this purpose, this study counted on the participation of 13 Colombian refugees who had been resettled in New Zealand from Ecuador, their previous place as refugees. The lack of academic research on Colombian refugees in New Zealand served as a primary reason for this study. The goal was also to contribute to the advancement of research on Colombian refugees in New Zealand and assist all New Zealand refugee organizations in the resettlement and integration programs. The chosen methodology for this study was the oral history and ethnography approach. Data collection methods comprised 12 semistructured oral history interviews conducted at the participants' homes, as well as a focus group session. Additionally, four participants shared their written diaries that determined the level of integration of the refugees in New Zealand.

The findings revealed that Colombian refugees in New Zealand encountered several challenges that jeopardized their integration into the country. The primary challenges faced by Colombian refugees in New Zealand were the lack of English proficiency, mental health problems, discrimination, and unemployment. These findings aligned with previous research conducted in New Zealand. Despite these considerable challenges, it is evident that Colombian refugees have managed to rebuild their lives in New Zealand. Remarkably, they expressed a strong sense of happiness and contentment with their life in the country. Moreover, they have developed a deep love for New Zealand and have not allowed the aforementioned challenges to interfere with their performance or hinder their determination to thrive in the country. In light of these observations, it can be concluded that Colombian refugees in New Zealand demonstrate resilience in their daily lives.

This pilot study contributes new knowledge about Colombian refugees in Ecuador and New Zealand, thus filling the gap in the academic literature on this type of research. Also, it provides new knowledge on how resilience helps refugees to face the problems of migration and how it helps the integration of these people into the new country. This study opens the doors for future studies concerning the integration of Colombian refugees in other countries and how resilience helps these people to integrate successfully into the host country.

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