THE ROLE OF “WEAK TIES” IN THE SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: THE CASE OF CENTRAL AMERICANS IN MONTRÉAL

Damaris Rose, Pia Carrasco and Johanne Charbonneau

December 1998

CERIS Working Paper No. 4

Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement – Toronto
The CERIS Working Paper Series

Manuscripts on topics related to immigration, settlement, and cultural diversity in urban centres are welcome. Preference may be given to the publication of manuscripts that are the result of research projects funded through CERIS. All manuscripts must be submitted in both digital and hard-copy form, and should include an Abstract of 100-200 words and a list of keywords.

If you have comments or proposals regarding the CERIS Working Paper Series please contact the Editor at:
(416) 946-3110 or e-mail at <ceris.office@utoronto.ca>

Copyright of the articles in the CERIS Working Paper Series is retained by the author(s)

The views expressed in these articles are those of the author(s), and opinions on the content of the articles should be communicated directly to the author(s) themselves.

JOINT CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH ON IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT – TORONTO (CERIS) 246 Bloor Street West, 7th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V4 Telephone (416) 946-3110 Facsimile (416) 971-3094
THE ROLE OF “WEAK TIES” IN THE SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: THE CASE OF CENTRAL AMERICANS IN MONTRÉAL

Damaris Rose, Pia Carrasco and Johanne Charbonneau

December 1998

CERIS Working Paper No. 4

Damaris Rose
Associate Professor
INRS-Urbanisation
Institut national de la recherche scientifique
Université du Québec
3465 rue Dorchester
Montréal, QC
H2X 2C6
E-mail: damaris_rose@inrs-urb.uquebec.ca
©Damaris Rose, Pia Carrasco and Johanne Charbonneau, 1998

1 Editor's Note: This paper was reformatted for pdf in March 2006. Every effort was taken to maintain the text and tables as they appeared in the original version, though some minor discrepancies might be present. A few small formatting errors have been corrected. The material contained in the front and back covers, however, has been changed to reflect CERIS and the Metropolis Project in 2006.
THE ROLE OF “WEAK TIES” IN THE SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: THE CASE OF CENTRAL AMERICANS IN MONTRÉAL

This paper draws on research conducted in a larger research project¹ the general objective of which is to enhance understanding of the settlement experiences of immigrant women in Montréal. Through qualitative interviews with some fifty women who immigrated from Central America, India, Poland and Vietnam between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, the project explores the social networks they develop and assesses how these networks function as resource systems that the women draw on as they go through different stages—from acclimatization to adaptation and perhaps to the beginnings of integration (Canadian Council for Refugees 1998: 7-8)—and experience various events in the settlement process. A social network, in this sense, can include both formal services and informal support systems (family, friends, acquaintances).

The rationale for focusing on the situation of women immigrants who have had several years’ settlement experience is that within nuclear family units, it is the women who do most of the arduous work of “adapting” and “negotiating” in the settlement process (Lamotte, 1991). This task, which tends to take a number of years, is complicated by the fact that language-training programs for immigrants remain consistently less accessible to women than to men in spite of recent reforms designed to make the system less discriminatory (Boyd, 1997). Yet existing research has concentrated on immigrants’ short-term adjustment process (1-3 years; see, e.g., Renaud, 1993) and most of the funding for ethno-specific front-line services provided by
Relatively little is known about the relative roles of formal support services compared to kin and friendship networks and acquaintances in immigrant women’s resource systems—although various generalizations and stereotypes abound, e.g. immigrants prefer to resolve all their problems within the family rather than use the social services system”—and little is known about the role geographical proximity plays in the deployment of these social networks as resource systems.

Our research team is interdisciplinary (two geographers, one sociologist) and we developed our project by bringing together insights from social network theory, urban social geography and feminist urban studies. Parts of this conceptual framework will be discussed further on in the paper (in particular, the concepts of strong and weak ties).

The specific questions our project as a whole is designed to address include:
-What is the significance of neighbourhood-based vis-à-vis “non-local” resources in immigrant women’s settlement experience, i.e., in what ways do proximity and mobility within the city “make a difference”? (Rose & Ray 1997).
-What are the relative roles of family and friends (“strong ties”), community and public services, and casual contacts and acquaintances (“weak ties”) made in various places—work, school, neighbourhood—in the web of resources immigrant women draw on in the settlement process and in the steps they take toward integration (however this problematic term is defined)?

It is on this latter question that the present paper focusses, and for only one of the four ethnocultural groups of immigrant women studied in the larger project. Based on qualitative interviews with 12 Latin-American immigrant women--mostly Central-American refugees, the goal here is to explore the significance of one of the components of the
women’s network, that of “weak ties”. This dimension has received only minimal attention in the literature but is coming to be recognized as crucial to the transition from settlement to integration, in that weak ties allow people to diversify their social network and serve as a gateway to an array of socio-economic and cultural resources beyond those generally available in the person’s ethnic or immigrant community (Aroian, 1992; Hagan, 1998).

**Strong ties, weak ties, and social integration: conceptual issues and theoretical framework**

Bettling in a new country entails, for each immigrant, a major process of reconstruction of her personal social network in the years after arrival. Ever since the landmark studies of the Chicago School, researchers have considered the presence of other members of the same ethnocultural community as one of the first reference points of new immigrants and as a factor facilitating their adaptation and integration, especially where there are strong traditions of mutual aid (Benson, 1990; Kalbach, 1990; Rémy, 1990, Simon, 1992). Studies on immigrant integration have, however, tended to focus on detailed analyses of homogeneous ethnic communities concentrated in particular neighbourhoods (Breton, 1964; Gold & Herberg, 1989; Lavigne, 1987). There has been little interest in individual immigrants’ trajectories (exceptions are Katuszewski & Ogien, 1981; Rogers & Vertovec, 1995) and even less in those of women.

Concepts developed by social network studies (Mitchell, 1969; Wellman, 1979) become very helpful for tracing these processes of resource-system building by
immigrants. This approach distinguishes different types of interpersonal ties. A person’s social ties can be developed from different sources (relatives, neighbourhood, work, leisure activities) (Litwak & Szelenyi, 1969). Those with whom one establishes ties can fulfill different roles (sociability, someone to confide in, material assistance, information) (Dandurand & Ouellette, 1992; Fischer, 1982, Fortin et al., 1987; Godbout & Charbonneau, 1996).

**The concept of weak ties**

Building on this notion of differentiated roles, Granovetter (1973) was the first to develop the concept of “weak ties”. This notion highlighted the possibility that an individual’s social ties could vary in intensity. Weak ties, for Granovetter, referred to acquaintances rather than to close family and friends. Weak ties tend to have specialized functions, implying less frequent contacts and often necessitating going beyond the immediate socially homogeneous neighbourhood where one lives. Those in one’s network with whom one has strong ties are likely to know one another, which tends to mean there is less diversity in the sources of information available to network members (Aroian, 1992; Hagan, 1998; Hanson & Pratt, 1995). In contrast, those with whom one establishes weak ties are more likely to act as “gateways” facilitating the flow of information or as bridges to other spheres of society or other resource systems removed from the individual’s network of strong, dense ties; they may also lead to new networks of strong ties. In this sense, access to weak ties may become a key element in social integration processes because of their potential to open up access to a wider range of resources (e.g., for finding a job, resolving a family problem) thus facilitating an individual’s
becoming more autonomous (see Granovetter 1983 and 1995 re. employment; Henning & Lieberg, 1996, for the role of neighbours) and less exclusively dependent on strong ties to a small, locally based and homogeneous community (see Hanson & Pratt, 1995).

Strong ties are associated with the notion of “protected community”. This notion—the classic “village in the city” identified by authors such as Young and Willmott (1956)—evokes the idea of individuals in an urban community concentrating on their primary social ties to family and friends. Fostered and reinforced by residential proximity and stability over time, these ties are such that network members do many types of activities together, in the same neighbourhood with which they closely identify. In this sense people can “protect” themselves from the anonymity of the big city and from the presence of the Other, from those they see as different from themselves. The notion of weak ties, in contrast, is associated with belonging to a modern, “emancipated community” in which social ties are no longer circumscribed by the limits of the neighbourhood as people seek out communities of interest, regardless of spatial propinquity or their own social origins, while coming to appreciate cosmopolitan urbanity (Wellman, 1979; Wellman & Leighton, 1980; Schiefloe, 1990; Bridge, 1995).

As Hagan (1998: 65) points out, research on immigrant settlement has emphasized the short-term advantages of networks anchored in the family and the neighbourhood at the expense of considering how diversification of social networks might influence pathways toward integration over a longer period. This is where the concept of weak ties may become very useful. For instance, as Aroian (1992: 180-181) suggests:

[H]eterogeneous networks and weak ties with members of the resettlement society may be poor sources of aid and emotional support but best for helping immigrants
learn new roles. Most likely, the network structure that is optimal for immigrants’
adaptation depends on their point in the resettlement process.

On the other hand, as Hagan (1998: 65) points out,

Migrants can become so tightly encapsulated in social networks based on strong ties
to coethnics that they can lose some of the advantages associated with developing
weak ties with residents outside the community.

Some recent work has, in addition, taken a new look at the notion of “the strength
of weak ties” at the micro-scale of the neighbourhood (Bridge, 1995; Schiefloe, 1990).
Even small gestures of recognition of one’s neighbours, “nodding relationships” whose
importance Granovetter minimized by labelling them “absent ties”, can be important for
people embarking on a process of cultural readaptation and social integration in a new
environment. Among marginalized groups, including certain groups of immigrant women,
experiencing such small neighbourly gestures may help them feel more at ease in their
immediate surroundings, more in a position to “master” the different spaces of their new
city and feel they belong there (Rose & Ray, 1997). Such gestures also help to make
cultural differences banal and non-threatening and may thus facilitate peaceful
coexistence of neighbours of diverse origins (Germain et al., 1995).

Immigrant women and weak ties

When one tries to imagine how an immigrant woman with young children builds her
social network, one is likely to envisage a network based on strong ties, essentially
limited to her own ethnocultural community, likely concentrated in a particular
neighbourhood (Lynam, 1985; Ray, 1998, Vega et al., 1991)—especially in the case of
those without paid employment outside the home (Ng, 1988). These strong ties would typically be with other members of her immediate and extended family, themselves immigrants, and perhaps also including close friends from the same ethnolinguistic community. She might also interact with neighbours, establishing certain relationships of exchange and mutual aid around domestic and child-related activities (see, e.g., Tivers, 1986). This type of network would essentially correspond to the notion of protected community defined above, especially if it only included other members of the same immigrant community.

In general, comparative work on men’s and women’s networks studies have found that women’s networks are more oriented toward family and friends and that they involve more emotional proximity than do men’s social networks (Dandurand & Ouellette, 1992; Fischer, 1982; Sapadin, 1988). This may explain why so little work has been done on weak ties among women in general let alone among immigrant women. The few studies that take gender relations into account stress that occupational segmentation by gender can play a determining role in immigrant men’s and women’s access to weak ties in different milieux, with significant consequences their respective processes of integration into the receiving society (Hagan, 1998; Kibria, 1993).

The theoretical issues raised above led us to want to explore the spheres of daily life likely to foster the formation of weak ties among women immigrants to Montréal and to examine what role these ties play in the settlement-adaptation-integration experience. What conditions enable their formation and what role do such ties play in the lives of these women in their various roles—as mothers of young children and as the family member doing most of the work of adapting and integrating their families into the host
society (Lamotte, 1991); as economic maintainers or co-maintainers of households, and as individuals engaged in a personal process of cultural renegotiation and social integration? Since—unlike most existing literature on immigrant settlement—we made it a point to interview women who had been in Canada and in Montréal at least five years, and so in what Aroian (1992) refers to as the “middle resettlement” phase, there was reason to believe that these women might in fact have various kinds of weak ties in their social networks, perhaps including some extending beyond the ethnic community of origin. This led us to want to explore the formation, the nature, and significance of weak ties by means of intensive interviews.

If existing literature has little to say about immigrant women’s weak ties, even less is known about differences among immigrant women of different ethnocultural origins in this regard. Our eventual goal is to do a comparative analysis of the question of weak ties among all four of the groups of immigrant women whom we interviewed; the empirical part of this paper is, however, limited to the experience of the Central-American group, given the still-ongoing state of our research project.

**Brief portrait of interviewees and their network of close ties**

To introduce the analysis on the role of weak ties, the characteristics of the sub-sample will be sketched out, followed by a brief presentation of the strong ties in their social network. These are essential elements of context for the question of the formation and role of weak ties to which the rest of the paper will be addressed.
The women we interviewed came from various Central American countries. Most came as refugees or refugee claimants, which was generally the case for Central Americans who arrived in Montréal between 1986 and 1991 (Québec, ministère des Communautés culturelles et de l’Immigration, 1992). As regards their family status, one of our selection criteria was the presence of at least one child under 13 at the time of interview. Family situations on arrival were quite diversified but with a significant number of lone-parent families, which is also quite characteristic of the Central American community in Montréal. All but one had held paid employment since their arrival and their levels of schooling were relatively high (for more details on sample characteristics, see the Annexe Table). Also, all the women lived in municipalities located in or close to the central part of the Island of Montréal (for a map, see Chicoine & Charbonneau, 1998); again, this reflects the spatial distribution of the Central American community in general.

Network of strong ties at time of interview

The first part of our interview schedule used standard methods of social network research to identify the people with whom the interviewee had strong social ties, and when they were established. (It was not feasible to reconstruct past social networks although we did ask about events that might have led to a loss of a network member since arrival.)

Table 1 shows that the size of the women’s networks is quite restricted, in fact more so than among the other groups studied (Chicoine & Charbonneau, 1998; Ray &
Chmielewska, 1997), and that there are more friends than family members in the network (this may be in part due to the refugee process). One should also note that, as network theory suggests, these women tend not to identify mere acquaintances as network members. Essentially then, the list of network members corresponds to the notion of strong ties.

TABLE 1
SIZE AND COMPOSITION OF CURRENT SOCIAL NETWORKS OF THE 12 INTERVIEWEES (COMBINED)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF TIE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF TIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediate family</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-laws / Extended family</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintances</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of social ties</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also looked at the year each person came into the interviewee’s network in relation to the latter’s arrival in Canada (Table 2). It can be seen that most network members are people the interviewees knew before coming to Canada. New members are mostly added in the first three years after settlement.
TABLE 2
TIMING OF CURRENT MEMBERS' ENTRY INTO INTERVIEWEES' SOCIAL NETWORKS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOMENT OF ENTRY INTO SOCIAL NETWORK</th>
<th>NUMBER OF MEMBERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Already in network before interviewee's arrival in Canada</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All the interviewees had lived at least 6 years (or almost 6 years) in Montréal. Social ties established after year 6 by those women who had lived longer than 6 years in Montréal have been excluded from this table to preserve the validity of the comparison.

These questionnaire data give us an idea of the strong social ties that the women can presently count on for social support. One may be inclined to conclude from them that our interviewees, even after a number of years' residence in Montréal, remained effectively in a “closed circuit” in the sense of having few friends who are not also immigrants like them and from the same part of the world (see Chicoine & Charbonneau, 1998). However, this would be a reductionist interpretation insufficiently sensitive to the multiple facets of the settlement and integration process. The complementary study of weak ties, which we explored by means of retrospective interviews with each of the women, after going through the factual questionnaire and inventory of their current social network, allows us to provide
a more nuanced interpretation. It is to this aspect of our research that we now turn.

**Weak ties in immigrant women’s settlement process: a “gateway” role?**

Our analysis of the qualitative data led us to organize the presentation of the role of weak ties around six themes which correspond to milieux more or less favourable to their development: language and other training courses; the workplace; government bureaucracies and para-state services such as health care; community organizations; the church; and the neighbourhoods lived in. These six types of milieux are not all on an equal footing in relation to the concept of weak ties. For example, some women might enrol in a course because someone else with whom they already had a weak tie encouraged them to do so. In other cases, it is the milieu itself that serves as an “incubator” for new weak ties, in the sense of a gateway towards other contacts which one would be unlikely to make through networks of strong ties. Our goal here is simply to cover the range of situations in which weak ties were present or established.

We thus analysed the women’s experiences in relation to each of the six milieux in the following terms:

- **How did they get there—through a weak or a strong tie?**
- **What are the intrinsic characteristics of each milieu, which could enable it to serve as an intermediary or gateway either toward the creation of new strong ties (e.g., friends made through church-sponsored social activities), or towards other weak ties (e.g., a government service that refers you to a more specialized service)?**
-To what extent does the milieu play a role for the individual, that strong ties, by definition, could not fulfill? For example, subtle gestures between neighbours that may help a newcomer feel more self-confident and help overcome mutual fears of difference. On the negative side, weak ties on the job or on the street, for example, could have the reverse effect so that the person loses confidence in her ability to be accepted or integrate and falls back solely on strong ties rooted in her ethnocultural community of origin.

**Language courses**

Language and other courses taken by immigrant women are good illustrations of the weak tie concept. One is often, though not invariably, referred to such courses through weak ties. Weak ties established during the courses (notably with the professor) may serve as a gateway toward other resources. This type of environment is also be very conducive to the development of self-esteem and facilitates positive encounters with those of other cultures.

All but one of the women interviewed took training courses (usually French language classes). This enabled a number of them to enter into contact with people outside the family network and even, in the case of those who came here all alone, to establish close friendships. In the first instance, attending language classes is one of the key ways of overcoming the shock of immigration, but over and above this, certain women saw the mastery of the language as a key tool in the adaptation process. Paulina (L09) is very clear on this point: “I knew that integration would begin by my getting a good grasp of the language”. She said this not only made her more independent but also raised her self-esteem. For several of the women, it was the hope of getting a better job that spurred them on to take more advanced language courses or specialized courses in certain fields.

Language instructors were sometimes key intermediaries for these women, guiding
them to various places that offered material aid to new immigrants (community centres, churches, CLSCs (Local Community Services Centres), etc.). They also helped some women take the necessary steps to further their studies. We even came across a case where the language instructor intervened to get proper medical care for a woman who was not being followed adequately for complications after childbirth.

**The workplace**

People employ both weak and strong ties to get jobs (this is the milieu studied by Granovetter (1973, 1983, 1995) and which led him to develop the weak tie concept). The literature suggests that the workplace can serve as a gateway to new weak ties, and occasionally to new strong ties, if it is the type of work environment conducive to positive experiences of sociability and if the job lasts a sufficiently long time for such contacts to be made. On the other hand, negative experiences, as well as types of work that reinforce isolation, can provoke a feeling of social exclusion and a retreat to reliable strong ties within one’s family or ethnocultural community.

All but one of the interviewees had worked outside the home (at some point or other, or continuously) since arriving in Montréal. They found out about these jobs through friends or acquaintances (see Hanson & Pratt, 1995). Most were low-skilled jobs (dishwasher, cook’s assistant), which often did not correspond to the women’s qualifications or work experience in their country of origin. Nevertheless, even low-skilled and precarious jobs were sometimes gratifying and helped to develop their sense of autonomy and their self-esteem.

Where their employment was a positive experience it served as a gateway for the formation of new interpersonal relationships. It was also conducive to their practicing and
improving their French language skills. The longer they stayed at the same job, the more important the workplace became as a reference point. It also enabled the women to develop a convivial rapport with other immigrants or people from the “host society” even though strong ties were rarely established. As Paulina (L09) recounted: “working (at a daycare centre) has helped me discover the Québécois […] I’d never worked with them before. I learnt a lot. Even my food habits changed!” However, she also took the opportunity to make sure her colleagues at the child care centre got to know about her own culture. These types of exchanges helped foster mutual respect of difference.

For our interviewees, the workplace was rarely an incubator of strong ties, contrary to what some of the literature on immigrants has suggested (see Hagan, 1998); this may have been because these were not, by and large, “ethnic enclave” jobs. Some of the women did, however, succeed in forming such ties, mainly with other women of the same ethnocultural origin.

Negative experiences on the job could have a highly traumatic effect, especially if it was the first job after arrival, making subsequent job searches difficult due to a loss of self-confidence and sense of social exclusion. Some of the women did not even want to talk about the jobs where they had such experiences. On the other hand, for others such experiences made them all the more determined to pursue their studies so as to get a job where they would be better treated. For those who persevered in the labour market despite unrewarding jobs that did not help them overcome their sense of isolation, the lack of opportunity for convivial exchanges may have made acclimatization to their new city and country more arduous (see Hagan, 1998, for the similar case of domestic workers who board in their employer’s home).
Governmental and para-state services

Among our interviewees, contacts with certain government services did not really depend either on weak or strong ties. The Québec immigration ministry and associated non-profit agencies direct refugees toward particular welfare and community health centres, for example. These milieux, by definition milieux of weak ties, can serve as gateways to other resources complementary to or an alternative to those provided by members of one’s network of strong ties: for example one woman was referred by her welfare officer to an employment search service sponsored by a downtown women’s centre, while others were directed to specialized counselling for family problems.

Being able to get welfare or other government benefits in the first months after settlement in Montréal enabled some of the women to attend basic language and integration classes (COFI) and in some cases more advanced language courses, which helped them improve their labour market position.

Resource persons such as nurses, family counsellors and social workers from local community services centres (CLSC) turned out, for half of the women interviewed, to have been very important at complex or difficult moments in their daily life. Several mentioned follow-up care and sometimes the help of other professionals such as social workers after childbirth. The women became familiar with the CLSC through various channels (although in the case of lone parents the CLSCs have special programmes targetting this group). These resource persons were appreciated not only for their material aid but also for their emotional support and companionship. In one case, the support provided by a specialized CLSC social worker (to whom the woman was referred by another CLSC which didn’t offer this service) helped a woman through the traumas and ruptures of social ties with her
network brought on by the process of separating from her husband. In another case, the youngest of our interviewees preferred to discuss problems linked to family relationships with a social worker than with others in her family.

**Community organizations**

Community organizations serving, among others, Spanish-speaking groups, are hybrid cases in relation to the notion of weak ties. People are usually introduced to those organizations through strong ties but these groups can in turn serve as gateways toward the receiving society as well as helping people feel less isolated and more self-confident. Several of our interviewees had used front-line services for immigrants and refugee claimants provided by community organizations (with government subsidies). The women’s first contacts with these organizations were often established very soon after arrival upon the recommendation of someone already in their close social network. Those without such a network were not necessarily aware of the range of front-line voluntary-sector services they could draw on.

In the first instance, the women contacted front-line services organizations for material aid (baby clothes, furniture) or practical advice (see Aroian, 1992). But in certain cases their contact with one particular organization helped them subsequently to diversify their resource system and to open some new doors. Social activities organized by this group enabled some of the women to meet others and develop new friendships. Some got involved in volunteer work for this community group or for other organizations through the intermediary of this group and it should be noted that fostering these kinds of connections is one of the “best settlement practices” enumerated by the Canadian Council for Refugees (1998: 22). Andrea (L02), for example, came by this route to volunteer in the kitchen of a
community centre in a working-class neighbourhood, which helped her break out of the isolation she was experiencing after her divorce and to make more contacts with francophone Montrealers. This kind of volunteer work could even help in getting a paid job: it was by this means that Paulina (L09), whose preschool education certificate was accredited by the Québec Education Ministry, managed to get a job corresponding to her qualifications. She was also one of the few women that we interviewed who had established a good friendship with a French-speaking co-worker despite the fact of her job being a short-term contract. These examples serve to illustrate the different characteristics of weak ties that an immigrant can benefit from within the same organization depending on what point she has reached in her settlement trajectory: initially, practical assistance and advice, provided in her language by people of similar origins; later, opportunities for getting to know better and be better understood by members of the receiving society.

Such positive experiences of diversification of social networks contrast strongly with those of Sofía (L11), another of our interviewees, who had never had social contacts beyond her family and her church and who had not yet overcome the language barrier. Sofía eventually told the interviewer—very discreetly—that she would have preferred to have had access to networks beyond and without links to her family so as to facilitate her adaptation to a new land (see Rose & Ray, 1997, for a similar sentiment expressed by a woman from India with a large family-based social network). Paulina’s (L09) experiences were less negative but she would have liked to have complemented her family-based support network with an independent mutual aid and friendship network of other young immigrant women like herself who could pool their resources and their “discoveries” of the city.
The church

Either strong or weak ties can lead someone to get involved with church-run social activities. Once the women were involved, some of the Spanish-language churches seemed to be conducive to the formation of new strong ties. The church was in fact an important resource for a number of the interviewees, as much for its social activities as its religious aspect as such (see Hagan, 1998). Opting for a Spanish church was linked not only to language barriers but to the perception of there being profound cultural differences underlying the Québécois tradition of religious services as compared to the Latin American one. One of our more bilingual interviewees felt that the Latin-American services helped pull people together and make immigrants feel at home whereas, for her, the Québécois services seemed lacking in “human warmth” (Marcela, L03). Thus, as another woman, Alejandra (L12), put it point-blank, “When we go to a French mass, it’s [purely] out of a sense of duty” (because they’re too busy that day to make the trip to their own church).

Participating in lay activities sponsored by the church enabled some of our interviewees to make new Spanish-speaking friends even a number of years after settlement, or to find new sources of mutual aid, sociability, solidarity or “cultural comfort” to replace certain social ties lost over the years. However, as other studies dealing with the sociability associated with “ethnic” churches have noted (Beattie, 1998; Hagan, 1998), among the women interviewed these activities did not lead to the formation of new weak ties because they only brought together other recent immigrants from the same ethnic group, in other words those whose social networks were dense and “multistranded”.
The neighbourhood

In contemporary North American cities the neighbourhood is first and foremost a milieu of weak ties, and it tends to be weak ties that lead people to move to a neighbourhood, unless one makes the move expressly to be closer to friends, family members or other people from the same ethnocultural community with whom one feels a strong affinity (Rose & Ray, 1997; Ray & Rose, 1998). This milieu can in turn enable the forging of strong ties in the form of new friends, or weak ties with neighbours with whom one has cordial but not close relationships, as well as “nodding relationships”. Positive experiences in the neighbourhood milieu can also contribute to the development of a sense of belonging and to overcoming the fear of difference.

We asked the interviewees to talk about neighbouring relations in each of the areas they had lived in since arrival in Montréal. While some of the women expressed no desire to interact with their neighbours, others clearly wanted to do so. In general, the possibility of feeling at ease with one’s neighbours (especially those of a different ethnic origin) seemed to increase with length of residence in the same area. Andrea (L02), for example, had lived in the same part of Verdun (a old working-class suburb in the south-west of Montréal) for eight years. Over time, a Latin-American community became established there and the fact of constantly running into Spanish-speaking acquaintances, including some she knew she could count on at a time of crisis, reinforced her sense of belonging in the area. But at the same time, she learned French and a good relation of confidence developed between her and her francophone next-door neighbour, with whom she exchanged services.

To take another example, two of Lucía’s (L07) neighbours became lasting, close friends, even after she moved away; these ties developed not only because all had a
common language and regional origin but also because their children were the same age and started to play together. More commonly, however, among our interviewees, the subject of children served as an ice-breaker, enabling neighbours to begin to talk and eventually to engage in neighbourly exchanges but without friendships developing. That was how Paz (L08) got to know her Arab neighbours upstairs, with whom their relationship strengthened when they sampled each other’s respective ethnic cuisine! These types of weak ties, and also those with local shopkeepers, seemed to help the women feel more comfortable in their neighbourhoods and thus to feel more self-confident about their ability to find their way in their new city (Rose & Ray, 1997).

Over and above the language barrier, the immigrant women we interviewed also find themselves, in their everyday life in the neighbourhood, confronting various cultural codes that are sometimes difficult to make sense of: more than one woman told us how she was nonplussed or even felt rejected by the fact that her francophone neighbours would never invite her in for coffee. Having to move frequently, as happened to many of our interviewees, made it more difficult to overcome the fear of the Other, become familiar with the diversity of cultural codes in a multiethnic environment and try out different ways of neighbouring. However, Mariana (L10), even after a number of years well-integrated into an extended family (from Toronto and Alberta), continued to perceive the interactions of anglo-Canadians, even at festive times like Christmas, as lacking in warmth and spontaneity. Paulina (L09) on the other hand, since being introduced to Québécois customs and ways of socializing by a colleague at work, was more able to decode local practices of neighbouring; as Aroian (1992: 190) points out, after the initial phase of settlement, immigrants often need intermediaries in order to make sense of “subtle cultural differences in styles of social interaction”.

Conclusion

The findings presented here underline the pertinence of studying the formation of weak ties among immigrant women. This seems to us a promising direction for enhancing knowledge about the dynamics of settlement and integration, in that it complements and adds nuance to the portraits of social networks obtained through the analysis of strong ties and helps us better understand the respective roles of different kinds of ties. Such research may also help us get away from excessively normative and over-generalized models of how immigrants proceed (or ought to proceed) from settlement to adaptation and integration. It sheds light on the mechanisms and gateways that allow immigrant women to seek out a more diversified range of resources so as to cope better with settlement in a new country, a new city and a new culture and even to begin thinking about their own personal self-development. Examining immigrant women’s experiences in milieux more or less conducive to the formation of weak ties can also shed light on the barriers, both overt and subtle, to the process of social integration. In this latter respect the study of neighbouring relations is in our view very revealing and merits more detailed examination in future research.

Additionally, at a time when the dominant social-political discourse reinvokes the responsibility of family networks for many kinds of social support, rather than state-supported agencies, our research indicates that for the Latin American immigrant women we interviewed—and doubtless for many others—strong social networks rooted in the family and close friends were indeed very important for “front line” assistance for new arrivals. Yet these networks were not necessarily sufficient in terms of their potential for
diversified medium term social support (Aroian, 1992; Payne & Strain, 1990).

Our findings also indicate that although not all immigrant women are heavily dependent on front-line settlement services offered in the formal system (apart from essential government services that all immigrants use), such services are often a precious resource that not only facilitates adaptation but can also offer alternative ways out of problematic situations, open doors (such as to jobs beyond traditional immigrant “job ghettos”) and suggest new horizons (such as, there is life after divorce). This only goes to underscore the need to denounce stereotypes about “immigrant cultures” being such that problems should ideally be resolved by drawing on resources within one’s network of strong familial ties alone (see Rose, 1997).

Some researchers in the social network field argue that the multiplication and diversification of social ties are generally associated with greater control over various aspects of one’s life (see, e.g., Specht, 1986). Our findings, like those of Hagan (1998), underline the pertinence of this point for immigrant women. They lead us to the provisional conclusion that when immigrant women can build a diversified social support network out of both “strong” and “weak ties” (so that they are simultaneously linked both to the “protected” and “emancipated” communities, to use the classic network theory concepts presented earlier in this paper), this may not only smooth their settlement and adaptation process and help set them on the difficult road to social integration but also may eventually open up new gateways and new horizons.

In conclusion, we may speculate as to whether the possibility of establishing weak ties in a diversity of milieux is of particular significance for immigrant women, to the extent that the connections they make through the workplace tend to be less diversified than
those made by men, and to the extent they spend more time than men in their residential neighbourhood (see Hagan, 1998). We also need to explore whether the fact that it is essentially left up to women to perform most of the daily work of social reproduction and to arrange the family’s dealings with educational, health and social services institutions (Lamotte, 1991; Freire, 1995) may explain the particular importance that their positive or negative experiences with such milieux may take on for women. We raise these questions in the hope of encouraging future research that would examine gender differences in the role of weak ties in immigrants’ struggles to acclimatize, adapt, and integrate themselves into the receiving society.
Annexe: Selected characteristics of interviewees (N=12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIRTHPLACE</th>
<th>IMMIGRATION STATUS UPON ARRIVAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Refugee/refugee claimant 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Other 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY SITUATION UPON ARRIVAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married, accompanied by spouse 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, reunited with spouse already here 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, but arrived without spouse 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, arrived alone or with parental family 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL OF SCHOOLING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College or university 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished secondary school 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than completed secondary 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHILDBIRTH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had child(ren) since arrival in Canada 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All children born before arrival in Canada 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEARS LIVED IN CANADA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6-7 years 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-9 years 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12 years 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CURRENT FAMILY SITUATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married and living with spouse 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parent: --single never married 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--separated / divorced / widowed 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CURRENT AGE GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 25 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 and over 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF CHILDREN AT HOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 child 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 children 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 children 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 or more children 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORK EXPERIENCE IN CANADA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has had paid work since arrival 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No paid work since arrival 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LANGUAGES CURRENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish only 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish and French 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish, French and English 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French and English 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE GROUP OF CHILDREN AT HOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children under 6 only 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under 6 and aged 6 and over 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children aged 6 and over only 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Les réseaux d’entraide et de sociabilité des femmes immigrantes après quelques années d’établissement à Montréal : le rôle de la proximité (Immigrant women’s social support networks after several years’ settlement in Montréal: the role of proximity), SSHRCC Strategic Grant (Women and Change), May 1995-Sept.1998. Principal researcher: Damaris Rose (INRS-Urbanisation) Co-investigators: Brian Ray (Geography, McGill) and Johanne Charbonneau (INRS-Urbanisation). Assistants: Pia Carrasco, Nathalie Chicoine, Ella Chmielewska, Van Ho, Roopa Nair.

This paper is largely based on a paper given in French at the Canadian Ethnic Studies conference in Montréal in Nov. 1997, which was subsequently revised and accepted (in June 1998) for publication in French in Canadian Ethnic Studies. Damaris Rose prepared this English version, with adaptations for the discussion paper format and readership. She wishes to thank those who attended her Research Seminar at CERIS and whose thought-provoking questions and insightful comments have helped improve the analysis and its presentation. Particular thanks are due to Ilene Hyman of the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry who supplied the very useful reference to the work of Aroian (1992). We also thank our colleague and co-researcher Brian Ray for his invaluable contributions to our thinking.

The women were recruited using a “snowballing” methodology with several “snowballs”, with the initial assistance of a multiethnic community organization and a Spanish-speaking acquaintance of the interviewer. By means of various intermediary contacts we were able to develop a diversified sample whose social networks overlapped very little. We tried to ensure that the sample included both those who had had recourse to community organizations serving new immigrants and those who had never used such services. The interviews were conducted in Spanish by Pia Carrasco and transcribed into English, as close to verbatim as the translation process could permit.

With one exception, a Peruvian, who corresponded in other respects to the profile we were looking for.

We asked the following questions (with various sub-questions which space does not permit us to reproduce here): “Now, thinking about your relatives who don’t live with you and who we’ve marked on the little diagram here (diagram of who, and where in the city or the world they live), and also your friends, your neighbours, acquaintances, people you see at work, can you tell me which ones you see often or with whom you communicate regularly?” Followed by, “And now, if it doesn’t bother you to tell me, could you give me a bit more detail about the interactions you have with these people, for example how you got to know them or under what circumstances you see them at the moment?”

We asked retrospective questions about the formation of social ties and the types of ties established in the course of various significant life events since arrival in Canada (in the family, job-or school-related, health or social services-related) as well as ties established in the various milieux of everyday life including at the scale of the various neighbourhoods where the women lived. Given the breadth of our survey instrument, however, we were limited in the detail we could obtain about some of these milieux (e.g., the church).

We had fully expected (based on existing North American literature) that the first child starting at primary school would be a pivotal event leading to the formation of new weak ties (with other parents at the school gates, at parent/teacher meetings). However, this was not at all the case for the Central-Americans interviewed. A recent study in Toronto suggests that such contacts are more likely to be established when the parents get help in figuring out the machinations of the school system, since this helps them overcome their reticence to participate in activities where they might meet other parents (Bernhard 1998).

All names used here are pseudonyms.
As it turned out, the community organization to which the women in our sample had the most recourse is rather more than a traditional and front-line immigrant aid organization because it is strongly oriented toward activities that foster sociability among different groups and offer pathways toward social integration in the broad sense.

Although various fundamentalist churches draw significant numbers of Montréal’s Latin Americans, all our church-going interviewees were Catholics.

References cited


BEATTIE, Laura (1998) Neighbourhood change and the ethnic church: cultural maintenance and service provision. Paper presented at annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Geographers, Ottawa, 2-6 June (Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC, V6T 1Z2)


ROSE, Damaris and Brian RAY, with Nathalie CHICOINE and Johanne CHARBONNEAU (1997) Discovering the city? Mobility Patterns in the use of services during immigrant women's settlement process in Montréal. Paper presented at annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Geographers, St. John's, Nfld., 19-23 August.


The Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement - Toronto (CERIS) is
one of five Canadian Metropolis centres dedicated to ensuring that scientific expertise contributes
to the improvement of migration and diversity policy.

CERIS is a collaboration of Ryerson University, York University, and the University of Toronto, as
well as the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, the United Way of Greater Toronto,
and the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto.

CERIS wishes to acknowledge receipt of financial grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada and Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the data provided by
Statistics Canada.

CERIS appreciates the support of the departments and agencies
participating in the Metropolis Project:

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Citizenship & Immigration Canada
Department of Canadian Heritage
Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
Status of Women Canada
Statistics Canada
Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency
Royal Canadian Mounted Police
Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada
Department of Justice Canada

For more information about CERIS contact:
The Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement - Toronto
246 Bloor Street West, 7th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V4
Telephone: (416) 946-3110 Facsimile: (416) 971-3094
http://ceris.metropolis.net
The Metropolis Project

Launched in 1996, the Metropolis Project strives to improve policies for managing migration and diversity by focusing scholarly attention on critical issues. All project initiatives involve policymakers, researchers, and members of non-governmental organizations.

Metropolis Project goals are to:

1. Enhance academic research capacity;
2. Focus academic research on critical policy issues and policy options;
3. Develop ways to facilitate the use of research in decision-making.

The Canadian and international components of the Metropolis Project encourage and facilitate communication between interested stakeholders at the annual national and international conferences and at topical workshops, seminars, and roundtables organized by project members.

For more information about the Metropolis Project visit the Metropolis web sites at:
http://canada.metropolis.net
http://international.metropolis.net