Colombians in the United States: History, Values, and Challenges

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M. L. Miville: *As the daughter of a Colombian immigrant who migrated to the United States in the late 1950s, during what is today known as the First Wave, I was raised to feel pride and joy about being a Colombian. My mother, who came from an upper income, professional family, came in search of a higher education, starting out as a student and teacher at a small Catholic college in North Carolina. Before the year was over, her father attempted to convince her to move back to Colombia, since she was a single woman and did not yet have any close family in the United States. Her first step back was to move to Miami, FL the following year where she found work as a secretary in a Catholic rectory. Within 6 months, she met and married my father, a US citizen of French Canadian background. I have many fond memories of my childhood in Miami, being taught Spanish along with my brothers by my mother in our screened-in porch, learning Colombian lullabies and other songs, listening to stories told in the form of "magical realism," and meeting many Colombian relatives and friends over the years when our family hosted their stay. I did not know it at the time, but Miami was one of only two primary areas (the other being New York/New Jersey) in which Colombians tended to raise their families. Once my mother knew she was going to stay in the Unite States, having married a citizen, she applied for and received legal permanent resident status fairly quickly. Then during the 1990s, when dual citizenship was made available to Colombians, she applied for and obtained her US citizenship. Because my mother had chosen to come to the United States to seek educational opportunities, she always was proud to say she was both Colombian and American, dual identities she retains to this day at the age of 94. My mother retained Spanish as her first language always, but also learned to speak English well, despite receiving little formal training in this language. I recall as a child that her initial years in the United States were challenging in the sense of feeling like an "other" as a non-native English speaker. Despite*

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Miami's history of welcoming Latinx people as well as people from Caribbean countries, many native born non-Latinx citizens typically viewed immigrants and Latinx people in particular with suspicion and sometimes open hostility, trends that continue today in many parts of the United States. As a result, at times I played the role of cultural broker, especially when my father was not available, in helping my mother deal with individuals who treated her negatively. Several other members of my family, mostly cousins, eventually migrated to the United States in the 1990s and 2000s, in part to escape the violence and constant threat of kidnaping as well as to seek educational/financial opportunities.

J. Borenstein: *My family came to the United States for educational opportunities and to escape the increasing conflict, brought on by the rise of drug cartels, political unrest, and growth of paramilitary groups. My paternal grandfather first left Colombia in the early 1950s and arrived in New York in search of better educational opportunities, amid political struggle and violence in Bogota at the time. Unfamiliar with the English language, my paternal grandfather struggled to learn and understand more than the basic phrases he had learned back in Colombia. His maternal uncle, who had left Colombia for New York, was a vital support for my grandfather. However, after completing high school, my paternal grandfather returned to Colombia, began working in textiles, and started a family.*

Like his father, my father came to the United States in the late 1970s, as an adolescent seeking better educational opportunities on an educational visa. He too struggled with the English language and US culture, but with guidance from relatives that had settled in New York some years prior, my father began to navigate his way through school. Working at many different local jobs and eateries, my father was able to pay for his education, and became the first in his family to obtain a graduate degree. His siblings would soon follow, to take advantage of the educational opportunities that the United States had to offer, as my father had.

My parents met, while my father was on break from college, in Colombia. My mother, after having developed a long-distance relationship with my father, decided that she too would seek to obtain a college education in New York. In the late 1980s, after my parents married, they decided that they would come to live in New York. The rise of the drug cartels and paramilitary groups like the AUC and the FARC, increased threats and dangers of kidnappings, extortions, and violence, which solidified for my parents that the United States would be the place to raise their family. Especially as Jews, who were generally in the higher socioeconomic classes in Colombia, the threat that the cartels and paramilitary groups posed was not to be taken lightly.

My parents were able to move to the United States with ease, as my mother already had American citizenship as an "anchor baby." Because my maternal grandparents were entrepreneurs of higher socioeconomic status and were survivors of the Holocaust, they came to Miami to have their children. Although they had raised their children in Colombia since infancy, they felt, given their history of persecution and oppression, that having American citizenship was an "insurance policy" for their children and grandchildren. My maternal grandparents came to Colombia from Europe in the mid-1900s, following persecution in the Holocaust.

They came to Colombia to be with their family, who had first arrived in Colombia in the early 1900s when there was economic promise and greater religious tolerance. My parents' marriage helped my father to receive residency in the United States and granted my siblings and me citizenship.

Both my maternal and paternal grandparents followed their family to the United States in the early 1990s to escape the growing violence, kidnappings, political unrest, and a rise in anti-Semitism in Bogotá. This sentiment awakened as a result of corrupt government officials, rise of narco-traffickers and paramilitary groups. However, their journeys were not seamless. After moving to Miami, my maternal grandparents were forced to spend a number of years in Canada while awaiting and reapplying for residency papers. After eventually receiving their green cards, my maternal grandparents were able to move back to Miami. My maternal grandparents had great difficulty in learning English and completing the citizenship exam—as it is given in English. However, my maternal grandfather finally achieved his dream of becoming an American citizen shortly before his passing at the age of 92. Similarly, my paternal grandparents spent numerous years applying, being denied and reapplying for residency in the United States, beginning in the late 1980s. After numerous unsuccessful attempts at residency, my paternal grandparents were able to obtain their green cards and move to New York to be with their children and grandchildren. For my paternal grandparents coming to America meant that they would have to attempt multiple lower level jobs and to take English classes with young adults half their age.

Leaving Colombia meant leaving behind their companies, their home, their language, and their community. The journey to the United States took many paths for my family but has ultimately led to the achievement of better opportunities, especially educational opportunities, safety, and security.

Colombian Americans are part of the rich mosaic that makes up the Latinx population in the United States today. As can be seen by the two narratives above, Colombians' experiences, during immigration and thereafter, reflect multiple diverse stories. As of the last census in 2010, approximately 1.1 million Colombian Americans were estimated to live in the United States (López, 2015). Given their small numbers relative to other Latinx Americans, it is not surprising that little has been published about the history, cultural values and strengths, and psychological challenges of Colombians and their families. We next present a brief summary of Colombian history and available demographic information, followed by a discussion of Colombian cultural values and psychological strengths.

Colombian American History

Since its founding in 1525 as a Spanish colony to the present day, Colombia has been known to fluctuate between times of prosperity and economic difficulties, educational resections and educational freedoms, religious persecution and religious freedom, political turmoil and disputes, peace and violence (Kline et al., 2018).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Colombians were associated with the stigma of drug trafficking and cartels, due to pop culture and media portrayals (Marrow, 2005) although this stigma has declined in recent years. Nevertheless, Colombians have developed and maintained a rich history of the arts, food, coffee, innovation, peace negotiations, and resilience in their native country.

Foundations of Colombian History

Considered a strategic passageway to South America, Colombia began experiencing migration thousands of years ago from Mesoamerica, providing passage for hunter-gatherers to populate other parts of the continent (Kline et al., 2018). Indigenous groups in the territory became the inspiration for the gold-rush legend that fueled the period known as the "Spanish conquest" of South America (Carvajal, 2017). Spanish colonization involved the massacre of a majority of the indigenous population, while at the same time, developing a large African slave market, primarily in the coastal cities, such as Cartagena and Santa Marta, and in the coastal regions of Chocó and Antioquia (Echeverri, 2008; Kline et al., 2018; Newson & Minchin, 2004). Colombia did not have large migratory movements until the early 1900s, when many came to the country after a new constitution allowed for greater religious tolerance (Kline et al., 2018). Consequently, people from European and Middle Eastern countries began migrating to Colombia, due to the promise of great opportunity (Carvajal, 2017).

Independence and Early Years

Colombia declared its independence from Spain in 1819, under the leadership of Simón Bolívar who had waged a series of campaigns starting in 1810 (Carvajal, 2017; Kline et al., 2018). The early years of the new nation brought with it much prosperity and growth (Kline et al., 2018). However, the 1830s were marked by the rise of both the conservative and liberal parties as powerful rivals in national politics (Carvajal, 2017; Kline et al., 2018). The many political struggles between conservative and liberal political parties fueled unrest and resulted in a bloody civil war from 1899 to 1902 that left hundreds of thousands dead. In 1902, another crisis struck the country when the United States acquired the zone where the Panama Canal was being built. After rejecting an accord that established US control over the canal, the Colombian government sent troops to Panama to regain control of the zone. However, with US support, local forces revolted and won independence from Colombia in 1903, creating the new country of Panama (Kline et al., 2018). After many years of tranquility and peace, following Panama's independence, conflicts between the Liberals and Conservatives led again to civil war in 1948 resulting in a dictatorship (Carvajal, 2017). From 1948 to 1958, increased economic

hardship and an oppressive dictatorship gave rise to a new round of political battles in the period known as *La Violencia* (Carvajal, 2017; Kline et al., 2018; Madrigal, 2013). The events of *La Violencia,* which resulted in the deaths of over 200,000, while destroying much of the agricultural industry (Carvajal, 2017; Madrigal, 2013), led to a major wave of Colombian immigration to the United States (Kline et al., 2018; Madrigal, 2013; Migration Policy Institute, 2015). The following section details the waves of migration that began in the 1950s, continuing until the turn of the century.

Immigration to the United States

The history of Colombians in the United States is part of a larger Colombian diaspora, constituting a long history catalyzed by political conflict, social unrest, and economic trouble. Colombian migration patterns have been distinguished by scholars as three distinct waves involving diverse demographic groups, reasons for migrating, and contextual factors with a mixture of push and pull factors from both the originating and host countries (Madrigal, 2013; Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Immigration to the United States was essentially minor from about 1820 to 1950 when fewer than 7000 Colombians immigrated to the United States. Indeed, the Colombian presence in United States was not recognized officially until 1960, when the U.S. Census began to specify the country of origin for South Americans (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Three distinct waves mark the major immigration points and are described below (for further details, please see Madrigal, 2013).

The First Wave (1945–1960)

The first Colombian community formed after World War I, through the arrival of several hundred professionals and their families who established themselves in New York City (Sassen-Koob, 1989). Many Colombians immigrated to the United States in order to complete their education, studying in universities across the country (Madrigal, 2013; Sassen-Koob, 1989). The growth of the Colombian American population was slow until the 1940s, when there was an increase in immigration as a result of the Colombian civil war (*La Violencia*) in 1948 and subsequent increased poverty (Sassen-Koob, 1989). Many Colombians continued to immigrate to the United States during the 1950s. The Colombian American community grew exponentially, when Colombian students decided to stay in the United States after earning their degrees in the mid-twentieth century (Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

The Second Wave (1965–1989)

The passage of several U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act's amendments in 1965 allowed for more Colombians to migrate to the United States (Madrigal, 2013). New York remained the most popular destination although smaller communities formed in Los Angeles, Houston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC (Guarnizo, Sánchez, & Roach, 1999). However, by the 1980s, Colombians began to settle primarily in Miami and its suburbs (Collier & Gamarra, 2001), given its proximity to Colombia as well as the presence of a large and diverse Latinx community. The area attracted wealthy Colombians, who settled there to get medical care, send their children to school, and escape from the social, economic, and political turmoil in Colombia. By the 1980s, Colombian Americans were one of the fastest growing Latinx groups in Miami (Collier & Gamarra, 2001). At the same time, negative and stigmatizing attitudes began to increase greatly toward Colombians in the United States, given the rise of drug cartels and violence in their home country.

The Third Wave (1990–2008)

The 1980s and 1990s brought the rise in cocaine trafficking, along with the influence of the drug cartels and paramilitary groups (Carvajal, 2017; Migration Policy Institute, 2015). From the 1990s, along with the ensuing turmoil over a political assassination in 1989, the number of Colombians admitted to the United States tripled, representing the largest numbers of immigrants from a South American country (Carvajal, 2017; Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Between 1992 and 1997, the intensity of the conflict in Colombia further increased, driving even more Colombians to migrate to the United States, with many of these immigrants departing to California (Guarnizo et al., 1999).

Although many Colombians sought naturalization and legal resident status in the United States, after 1990, undocumented entry into the United States increased (Aysa-Lastra, 2007). These individuals witnessed the political unrest and experienced the economic decline of their native home. This group of individuals also possessed a wider range of demographics, specifically in regard to socioeconomic status as compared to other groups during the prior waves of immigration. It was also during this time, and until the present, that the United States became more hostile to accepting applications for residency and citizenship:

> Colombians who entered during this wave…found themselves experiencing concerns and frustrations at their inability to obtain legal status, regardless of their educational and socioeconomic background. They [found] it difficult to understand the US system and accept that they [could] not obtain licenses and permits to work in their line of business or profession. (Madrigal, 2013, p. 30).

Aysa-Lastra (2007) also noted that after this time period not only were women more likely to travel without documentation than men, but also more Colombian migrants traveled without documentation after 1990 than before this period.

Colombians in the United States Today

Since the 2000s, the number of Colombian immigrants continued to grow, despite efforts from the Colombian government to bring back some of its citizens, specifically professionals (Carvajal, 2017; Madrigal, 2013). Throughout this period, multiple peace agreements were negotiated between the Colombian government and various paramilitary groups, most notably The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC), and by 2004 several of these groups had disarmed (Kline et al., 2018). Recently, intensive security operations against the remaining paramilitary groups have proven to be productive, and the number of crimes, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks in Colombia significantly has decreased (Carvajal, 2017; Kline et al., 2018). In June 2016, the Colombian government and the paramilitary groups signed a permanent cease-fire agreement, laying the groundwork for the final peace treaty (Carvajal, 2017; Kline et al., 2018). On August 15, 2017, the Colombian government declared an official end to its conflict with the last of the paramilitary groups (Kline et al., 2018).

In addition to immigration patterns outside of Colombia, there also are a large number of Colombians who have been and continue to be internally displaced as a result of the political turmoil and violence of the past 30 years (Carvajal, 2017; Migration Policy Institute, 2015). In fact, far more Colombians were internally displaced due to violence and turmoil than those who fled and settled abroad, numbering well over five million by 2015 (Højen, 2015). This internal displacement was a consequence of guerilla groups controlling large masses of land, in mostly rural areas, subsequently forcing movement of those living there to move to large cities. Although there have been recent peace proceedings with the FARC and paramilitary groups, internal displacement continues to be a major problem, as many rebel groups move in to take over the land portions when the FARC moved out.

Finally, entry into the United States by Colombians has persisted beyond the three waves of immigration. In 2012, approximately 280,000 people from Colombia obtained legal residency in the United States by gaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). For the majority of these Colombians, this status was gained primarily through the familial sponsorship, followed by refugee status. Additionally, entry into the United States was procured through student visas, with 7000 students from Colombia in the United States, and temporary work visas.

In the current US political climate, it is important to consider the implications of immigration from countries like Colombia to the United States. Immigration detention centers continue to detain immigrants, who although not considered high priority under the Obama Administration, are now being removed from their homes without knowing when or if they may return (Fertig, 2017). From 2017 onward, these individuals at times have been suddenly and unexpectedly removed from their communities without any notification to their families, violating expected immigration agency protocols. This cruel way of handling immigration has led to undue and harmful separation from family members and desperate circumstances where

families are forcibly reconfigured and their children become at risk of their basic and psychological needs not being met fully. Given the many diverse causes and impacts of immigration narratives across several generations of Colombians described here, it is clear that a careful detailing of the unique circumstances of each Colombian family's immigration narrative should be a part of any mental health assessment.

Demographics of Colombian Americans

As noted earlier, as of the last census in 2010, it has been estimated that there are approximately 1.1 million Colombian Americans in the United States (López, 2015). Colombian Americans represent both Colombians who have immigrated to the United States and those born in the United States with Colombian origin through at least one Colombian parent (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Today Colombians constitute 2% of the Latinx population in the United States and are the seventh largest population of Hispanic origin (Pew Research Center, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2017; Sanchez & Aysa-Lastra, 2013). Although they make up a small percentage of the overall Latinx population in the United States, Colombians are the largest group of South Americans in the United States (Flores, 2017). Of the total 1.1 million, 61% are foreign born and 39% were born in the United States (López, 2015). Sixty-five percent of Colombian immigrants arrived before 2000 (Migration Policy Institute, 2015), and approximately 3/4 of Colombian immigrants (74%) have obtained US citizenship (Flores, 2017; Sanchez & Aysa-Lastra, 2013). Most Colombian immigrants in the United States arrived during the 1980s and 1990s, during a time of particular violence and upheaval in Colombia (Carvajal, 2017; Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Colombian immigrants in this era headed not only to the United States, but also to Venezuela, Spain, and Ecuador (Carvajal, 2017; Marrow, 2005). However, due to the current political situation in Venezuela, Colombians who earlier had migrated there later migrated to the United States (Carvajal, 2017; Madrigal, 2013; Sanchez & Aysa-Lastra, 2013).

Since the initial waves of immigration in the mid-twentieth century, Colombians have been in the United States long enough that today there is a second generation of Colombian Americans (i.e., US born children of Colombian immigrants). Approximately 397,000 individuals make up this population, the majority of whom (57%) have one parent who identifies other than Colombian (about half of these individuals have parents who are US born). Most second-generation Colombians are relatively young, with the median age of 15, although over 40% are of working age, i.e., between 18 and 64 (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Given this ethnic mixture, the issues of language capacity and ethnic identity seem important to assess and research.

Colombian Americans can be found all over the United States but are more heavily concentrated in the South and Northeast. Roughly 51% of Colombian Americans live in the South, with the majority (31% of total number of Colombians) located in

Florida (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Madrigal, 2013; Migration Policy Institute, 2015); indeed, Florida has the largest population of Colombians in the United States. In the Northeast, mainly New York and New Jersey (25%), the second largest gathering of Colombians is estimated at 32% (Madrigal, 2013; Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

Education, Employment, and Socioeconomic Status

Colombian Americans, according to the Migration Policy Institute (2015), have similar levels of educational attainment to that of the overall US population. Colombian Americans, ages 25 and older, are one of the highest educated Latinx groups in the United States (Flores, 2017). A total of 34% of Colombian American have completed degrees in higher education, as compared with 14% of all US Latinxs which also is greater than the total US population (30%) (López, 2015). During 2012, a total of 161 doctoral degrees were awarded to international students from Colombia, making Colombia the 13th largest origin group amid international award recipients (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Although a common stereotype regarding international students in the United States is that they typically want to stay, this is not necessarily true for these high achieving students. Only about half of Colombian international students expressed such a desire.

Given their relatively large numbers in higher education, Colombian Americans on average earn higher wages than the median earnings for all US Latinxs, but still earn less than the median of the US population. Roughly 70% of Colombian Americans, 16 years old and older, are in the work force (Migration Policy Institute, 2015), and the median income for Colombian Americans is $54,500, making it the fifth highest earning group of all US Latinxs. Many Colombian immigrants, especially those who emigrated during the “third wave” in the 1990s include a larger percentage of the middle and upper-class professionals (Collier & Gamarra, 2001). Thus, the poverty rate of Colombians typically is lower than the overall US Latinx population, mirroring that of the general US population at 11% (López, 2015). Colombians who live abroad typically display strong ties to their native country, with Colombian remittances totaling $4.1 billion, including $1.3 billion funneled through the United States (Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

Regarding language proficiency, according to a study done by the Pew Research Center (2017), Colombian Americans are ranked the fifth highest Latinx group for English proficiency, at 64%, as compared with 32% of the total Latinx population. Additionally, in the same survey on English proficiency, 84% of Colombian Americans reported speaking Spanish at home. These statistics indicate that for the most part, Colombians typically learn to speak the language of the host country, which in the United States is English, while striving to maintain their native Spanish language within their family and personal networks.

Colombian Diversity

Colombians are a highly diverse population (Marrow, 2005). Racially speaking, Colombian Americans consist of European, Afro-Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Jewish, and indigenous heritages (Marrow, 2005). Nevertheless, Colombians largely identify themselves in the United States at much higher rates than other Latinx groups as "White" (Osorio, 2013). Colombian Americans include slightly more females (55%), which is unlike other ethnic groups (Osorio, 2013). Osorio further states that the ratio of female Colombian immigrants is higher than most immigrant groups and that the ratio has been rising. Moreover, Colombian Americans are relatively young with a median age of 36 (Pew Research Center, 2017), but tend to be older than other Latinx groups. Additionally, a small minority of the Colombian American population (7.2%) is under the age of 18 (Sanchez & Aysa-Lastra, 2013).

In terms of religious practice, 71% of Colombian Americans are Roman Catholic (Beltrán, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2014), and the second largest religious group, which makes up 17% of Colombian Americans are Protestants, primarily Evangelicals (14.4%) (Beltrán, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2014). Together, these numbers indicate an overwhelming majority of Colombians identify as Christian/Catholic. It also is estimated that 7.3% of Colombian Americans belong to Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, indigenous, and other religious groups (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; DellaPergola, Dashefsky, & Sheskin, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2009, 2014), while a small number of Colombian Americans (4.7%) are not religious (Beltrán, 2012). Unfortunately, limited data exist on these marginalized religious groups.

Race

The idea of racial discrimination is not one foreign to all Colombian immigrants, especially those identified as Afro-Latinxs. Colombia's neglect to enforce race-based anti-discrimination legislation is a systemic issue in the country (Castro, 2013). Unfortunately, identifying the total number of Afro-Latinxs in Colombia has proven a difficult task due to several variables, including the dearth of research literature regarding this population, the research methods utilized, and the high mobility of the residents of Colombia. A stark example of the negative experiences of racism in Colombia was reported in 2008 (Castro, 2013) when a woman and her friends were out dancing one night. They were rejected by multiple nightclubs in the capital city of Bogotá due to the color of their skin, a common practice not supported by the law but by social norms of "exclusivity." The group was in Bogotá's *Zona Roja* (Red District), an area synonymous with "wealth, exclusivity, and consumption" but only for White upper socioeconomic classes. In the weeks that followed this incident, the woman and her friends sought legal counsel who accused the nightclubs, the mayor of Bogotá, Samuel Moreno, and the former president of the country, Alvaro Uribe, guilty of not providing Afro-Latinxs protection from racial discrimination. The court case rose up to the Colombian Supreme Court

where they ruled in favor of the woman and her friends, and the protection of their civil liberties.

In addition to racism from one's native country, race is highly salient for Afro-Colombians entering the United States where racism continues to be a pervasive social illness, forming the basis of a racially stratified society (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Furthermore, the term "Latinas/os" does not specifically address the realities and experiences of dark-skinned Latinxs, rendering them invisible and likely leading to psychological consequences. Mental health counselors should be aware of these concerns as well as the long history of race/racism in Colombia and all Latinx countries.

Gender

As with most Latinx countries and cultures, traditional gender roles are socialized from the time of birth for both males and females (cis-gender status is typically presumed of all Colombian children). These traditions are further buttressed by the deeply held religious beliefs of Christianity/Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and other religious organizations. Thus, the culturally based constructs of *machismo/caballerismo* and *marianismo* remain highly valued and strongly expected in most Colombian families regarding the behaviors of men and women, respectively. A key finding of some recent research (e.g., Diaz, Miville, & Gil, 2013) regarding gender egalitarian attitudes is that although most Latinxs view the roles of women and men within the family as *equal*, this does not necessarily translate into meaning *similar*. Thus, Colombian families in the United States are likely to be traditional, although with some unique "Americanized" arrangements, such as the likelihood of both boys and girls being encouraged to seek higher education, though perhaps with different consequences regarding their respective career paths (Miville, Mendez, & Louie, 2017).

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

As the history of Colombian immigration to the United States indicates, Colombians from many levels of education and financial resources are present in the United States. Although little information has been gathered regarding the psychological needs and concerns of these various groups, it is reasonable to suggest that residence/citizenship status has an impact on current financial opportunities. However, counter to the stories of other Latinxs in the United States, a number of higher SES Colombians who immigrated to the United States were undocumented, especially those who left Colombia during the height of the 1990s violence. Thus, the intertwining of SES and immigration status may be quite complex, and it is the unique narrative of each Colombian person and family that will be important to assess for the impact of these respective statuses. Clearly much more research is needed to explore the impact of SES status on the mental health functioning of Colombia Americans.

Sexuality

In addition to considerations of race, gender, and SES, there are other Colombians who can be considered vulnerable and marginalized populations, specifically those who have been forced to leave their native country of Colombia because of issues other than war and violence. One such group is that of sexual minorities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people. Avivi (2006) described the invisibility of this population whose story is not one of military persecution but that of sexual persecution. Prior to arriving to the United States, LGBTQ Colombians must go through the process of political asylum that requires they disclose their sexual orientation and their stories of persecution (Avivi, 2006). This is quite a shift for many LGBTQ Colombians, since they typically do not disclose this information in Colombia, and according to Avivi (2006), thereby creating a "barrier" to enter the United States since many may experience a great deal of hesitancy about coming out about their sexuality. Another layer of marginalization is added when LGBTQ individuals are forced to "out" themselves to their fellow Colombians, who may act as their legal counsel and advocates but may not be welcoming or accepting of their sexual identity. Avivi (2006) argues this creates a propensity for the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in some of these individuals, and an experience that may continue to haunt them throughout their lives.

Once LGBTQ Colombians arrive in the United States, they navigate issues of privilege and power regarding their ethnicity, since much of the LGBTQ community is centered around White gay culture, including Miami and New York City. Multiple complex issues based on national, ethnic, and sexual identities need to be navigated at once beginning upon arrival. Therefore, LGBTQ Colombians struggle with straddling two different identity groups, and must consider living in predominantly Latinx neighborhoods such as Hialeah, in Miami, which provides a sense of ethnic hegemony and security (i.e., job attainment), or move to South Beach where there is an openly gay culture (Avivi, 2006). Transgender populations also face issues of homelessness coupled with discrimination that may lead to grave psychological implications. As with other aspects of diversity affecting Colombians, more research on LGBTQ Colombians is greatly needed.

Colombian Cultural Values: Promoting *La Vida Sana*

When discussing Latinx communities, a major topic involves describing the unique cultural values that form the basic framework of how Latinxs view the world and each other. Excellent descriptions of these values are available elsewhere (e.g., Arredondo, Gallardo-Cooper, Delgado-Romero, & Zapata, 2014), and we will focus on several values that seem especially relevant to Colombians and their families, particularly in understanding the sources of their strengths and resiliency. These values include *familismo, simpatía/personalismo, respeto,* and *fatalismo*.

Without a doubt, the key cultural value in which many Colombians are socialized from birth is the importance of family (i.e., familismo). Familismo includes extended family members and close associates and is linked with qualities such as "interdependence, obligation, loyalty, solidarity, and reciprocity" (Miville et al., 2017, p. 839). This value is central in most critical life decisions of Colombians, such as immigration (e.g., whether to leave family members), career choice (e.g., whether a job will take too much time away from one's spouse or children), and place of living (e.g., whether to return to one's family in Colombia upon completion of a higher education degree in the United States). Even the decision of accepting an LGBTQ family member is often predicated on the strength of familismo, that is, accepting one's loved ones, despite important, even potentially conflictual, differences, in order to promote family peace (this also includes LGBTQ family members regarding homophobic relatives).

Three other values buttress familismo, respeto, and simpatía/personalismo. Respeto is a value that recognizes the importance of individuals in authoritative positions, particularly parents/grandparents, religious and other leaders (priests, rabbis), teachers, professionals, and for more traditional households, even husbands. More modern understandings of this value reflect simply the need to always maintain the dignity of the other person in the context of human relations. Benefits of respeto include children adhering to family needs and expectations, for example, in the choice of partners and jobs to ensure the overall family's survival and success. However, risks can arise regarding rigid adherence to these values, for example, second-generation Colombians in the United States, when younger people wish to choose a person or a career that is at odds with parental and family wishes. Simpatía, a value that signifies that "each individual carries a responsibility to advance harmonious relationships through behaviors that communicate mutual respect, emphasize positives, and deemphasize negatives to achieve smooth interpersonal exchanges" (Miville, Arredondo, et al., 2017, p. 839) often plays a role in helping families resolve complex matters. Being *simpatico/simpatica* enables individuals to develop fairly sophisticated relational styles and communication patterns that can allow for working through differences while at the same time maintaining smooth or positive relations. A related value, personalismo, similarly emphasizes the importance of being courteous with others, reflecting the "unconditional recognition of the essential value of each individual. A person's value stems from who they are unto themselves and from their membership in a family group, rather than from their social status or from their professional accomplishments" (Mederos, 2004, p. 11).

Fatalismo, another key cultural value for many Colombians, often linked with spiritual/religious beliefs systems, refers to the collective wisdom regarding the many events in life that simply are out of one's control. Fatalism, for many Western mental health professionals, often is viewed negatively, as simply not taking responsibility, being apathetic or even pessimistic, perhaps leading to depression and other negative psychological consequences. In contrast, many Colombians, indeed many Latinxs, subscribe to the belief of *lo que Dios quiere* (whatever God wants). Simply put, fatalismo refers to letting go of "false notions of control… viewing individuals as part of a larger whole, being present in the moment, humility, equanimity, and

acceptance (akin to the famous serenity prayer)" (Miville, Arredondo, et al., 2017, p. 840). Some of these beliefs are now central tenets of several evidence-based therapies in the United States and elsewhere.

Together this constellation of cultural values forms the basic guide to and framework for building and living *la vida sana* (the sane life). Many Colombian families focus on working together for a larger purpose, such as to serve God/deity, raise children, take care of elders, and so on; success in achieving this purpose is attained by living a focused and disciplined life, at least to the extent that one can in the face of stress, discrimination, poverty, and so on. Living la vida sana is a major way of dealing with some of the concerns described next as Colombians transition to life, both opportunities and challenges, in the United States.

Colombians in the Post Migration Era

To date, there is an abundance of research on the post migration experiences of immigrants and children of immigrants from Latinx countries. Although this literature has been beneficial for many reasons, including work with the Latinx population as it relates to mental health, little to no research has been done on many specific Latinx populations, including Colombians. The following section will discuss these experiences for the general Latinx population that then will be followed by an exploration of how each topic applies to Colombians in the United States. Topics of the post migration era include (1) acculturative stress and intergenerational conflict, (2) racism, discrimination, and mental health, (3) sense of belonging and identity, and (4) contact with one's native country and maintaining cultural values.

Acculturative Stress and Intergenerational Conflict

Acculturative stress refers to the many stressful, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable experiences by Latinx immigrants and their children as they adjust to living in a new country (Arredondo et al., 2014). The cultural and psychological navigation between what often feels like two different worlds, the host country and country of origin, place much of the Latinx population at greater risk of stress. Often, the stress experienced by immigrants who find themselves in a new country parallels that of loss and grief (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981).

A common experience regarding acculturative stress is intergenerational conflict, especially with mixed status families. In other words, differences in age and immigration status often pose major conflicts between generations, especially within families (Dennis, Basañez, & Farahmand, 2010). Dennis et al. (2010) found that two types of intergenerational conflict, values/expectations and acculturation, between Latinx parents and children were predictors of depression and low self-esteem. These researchers, as many others, demonstrated that intergenerational

conflict is closely tied to acculturative stress and mental health outcomes. Given that nearly half of Colombians today are second generation and who also may have a parent either from the United States or another country, it is likely that intergenerational conflict is a highly relevant concern for many Colombian families.

Madrigal (2013) studied acculturation with Colombians in the United States from the three different waves of immigration and did not find any significant relations between acculturation and well-being (Madrigal, 2013). Instead, she found that for Colombians in the study, resilience and self-esteem were positively correlated with well-being. Since most of the participants of the study were first generation, Madrigal suggested that acculturative processes regarding the host country had not fully taken place, as they might for second and further generation Colombians.

Racism, Discrimination, and Mental Health

As with many other minority communities, there is some literature on experiences of racism and discrimination among Latinxs (Castro, 2013; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Feagin, 2014; van Dijk, Barquin, & Hibbett, 2009). In addition, a large portion of the research on discrimination ties these experiences to effects on mental health (Cislo, 2007; Díaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Feagin, 2014; Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Pérez, Fortuna, & Alegría, 2008). Results from studies repeatedly demonstrate the explicit and serious impact that such experiences can have on minority populations, especially the Latinx community. From seemingly "innocent" microaggressions to more explicit forms of discrimination, impact on mental health is a serious concern for minority communities, including Colombians, as Latinxs and for Afro-Colombians, as people of African descent.

Race is often a taboo subject for the Latinx community (van Dijk et al., 2009) both in Latin America and the United States. For many years, there has been a pattern of referring to the term, Latino/a, as a race, and potentially obscuring the racial diversity within the Latinx community. Although this sentiment still holds truth for many Latinxs, the scholarly discourse has moved towards referring to the Latinx community as an ethnicity with racial diversity. In an exploration of race in Bogotá, Colombia, Castro (2013) highlighted the everyday experiences of racism for Afro-Colombians. Although no study of Afro-Colombians' experiences with racism in the United States yet has been published, it is important to consider how experiences with racism may transfer from the country of origin, Colombia, to the host country, the United States, for these individuals.

In terms of mental health and well-being, undocumented Latinx immigrants often suffer from high rates of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and PTSD (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013; Grant et al., 2004; Kamal & Killian, 2015; Martinez et al., 2015, Vega, Sribney, Aguilar-Gaxiola, & Kolody, 2004), whereas current data indicate that documented Latinx individuals often share the same rates of disorders as the general population. Unfortunately, there is little literature that focuses specifically on the mental health of Colombians in the United

States. However, some evidence exists that demonstrates the most common mental disorder for Colombians in the United States is *depression* (Cislo, 2007). One interpretation of this trend is that, given the emphasis on promoting family peace and harmony, it is possible that some Colombians may internalize their strong negative feelings since their overt expression may be received negatively by others as interfering with smooth family functioning. Another important consideration is the lengthy exposure to violence that many immigrant Colombians were subjected to, prior to their arrival in the United States, leading to a greater vulnerability to depression.

Sense of Belonging and Identity

Sense of belonging (SB) has been referred to as a vital mental health concept that has an impact on mental health and general well-being (Georgiades, Boyle, & Fife, 2013; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Young, Russell, & Powers, 2004). Although SB shares characteristics with loneliness, alienation, and hopelessness, it has a unique quality because of the many contexts it can be applied to (i.e., school, family, host country) (Hagerty et al., 1992). Although SB has been studied with a number of populations, it has not commonly been studied with the Latinx community.

Gonzales and colleagues (Gonzales et al., 2013) recently conducted a study that explored the effects of SB on the "1.5 generation" of immigrations (immigrants who have lived most of their life in the host country). Gonzales et al. described the inability of these individuals to participate in important "adolescent rites of passage" in the United States (i.e., going to their dream colleges, driving, or working at any number of jobs), which in turn pushes individuals toward social isolation. More specifically, Gonzales et al. state that 1.5 generational interviewees reported the feeling of having "no place to belong," eliciting feelings of uncertainty and stress. While SB has been demonstrated to have a serious effect on mental health in general, Gonzales et al. emphasized the vital role SB played in undocumented 1.5 generation individuals' mental health and well-being. Given the importance SB has on overall mental health, SB also is linked with identity development, since feeling as though one belongs provides individuals with space to create one's identity.

Although little research on either SB or identity has been conducted on Colombians in the United States, Madrigal (2013) whom we cited earlier explored ethnic identity and well-being among three waves of Colombian immigrants. Surprisingly, she found that the stronger Colombians identified with their ethnic background, the lower their well-being. This finding was particularly significant for Colombian men who had immigrated to the United States during the third wave (1990–2008) when political violence in their homeland was at its height. It was suggested that these findings can be understood:

> …by exploring feelings of discrimination, marginalization, or exclusion from mainstream society, dissatisfaction outside the country of origin, and cultural uncertainty. As Colombian

> men feel they belong to their nationality, their ethnic identity is delineated by their subjective personal knowledge about their country, and the pride Colombians feel for being members of that ethnic group. A strong ethnic identity of men in the sample does not seem to be a safeguard for their overall well-being; therefore, it affects them negatively. (Madrigal, 2013, p. 42).

Another important finding by Madrigal (2013) was that the well-being of those Colombians who entered the United States as political refugees was significantly lower than others who had entered with different types of statuses. Men from Wave 2 (1965–1989), particularly the latter end of the wave, had the lowest levels of well-being. These individuals had lived in Colombia for many years with chronic violence prior to their arrival in the United States. This gender difference conceivably might be linked with men's traditional roles as protectors of their family during particularly stressful periods. Clearly, much more research is needed to untangle the experiences of immigration (time and reasons), acculturation, identity, gender, and well-being for Colombians in the United States.

Contact with Native Country and Maintaining Cultural Values

Contact with one's home country for immigrants and their children provide individuals with information and critical cultural immersion experiences that should be explored for their impact on psychological functioning. The amount of, and manner in which, individuals communicate with others in one's native country provides insight into how connected immigrants may feel to both their home country and host country. In addition, this information also provides insight as to how immigrants maintain cultural values.

Waldinger (2007) surveyed Latinx immigrants (including Colombians) regarding their level of communication with their home country. Some significant trends included: (1) "63% of Latinxs surveyed do at least one or two of the following: send remittances (funds), make phone calls at least once a week, and/or travel back to their country of origin with the past two years" (p. ii); (2) "activities tied to home countries are more common among recent arrivals than among those who have been in the U.S. for many years" (p. ii); and (3) "higher levels of engagement with the home country are associated with weaker attachment to the U.S. across several indicators" (p.iii). Colombians were found to be among those Latinxs with the most contacts with their native country.

The maintenance of cultural values is another indicator of close ties with one's native country and culture. Sanchez and Aysa-Lastra (2013) explored how Colombians and Venezuelans maintain cultural values in the United States by examining how immigrant organizations from these countries portray themselves. Although Sanchez and Aysa-Lastra (2013) provided important information about immigration patterns, and portrayals of immigrant organizations in the United States, some of the most valuable information was describing who runs these organizations. Sanchez and Aysa-Lastra (2013) found that the largest organizations for

Colombians in the United States are student led. Many of the organizations focused on several important themes: promoting a more positive image of Colombia abroad, including the United States, and developing networks of communication among Colombian immigrants. Sanchez and Aysa-Lastra (2013) also found that "Over time, Colombian immigrant organizations have become more active inside US society, contradicting the apathetic and indifferent stereotype. This is consistent with their higher rates of permanent residence in US" (p. 10). This kind of information on organizations provides a pathway to how to speak about and conduct research with Colombians in the United States.

Conclusions and Future Directions

As we have discussed in this chapter, Colombian Americans represent a diverse group of individuals, based on race, religion, SES, immigration status, language proficiency, and so on. For more than half a century, many have arrived in the United States as the result of the pull of seeking greater opportunities and the push of escaping periods of intense violence and corruption. Today the future of the country of Colombia holds great promise politically and economically, with the end of much of the guerilla fighting. Colombians in the United States appear to be prospering as well, given their higher rates of academic achievement and earning power. Clearly, the future for Colombians in the United States and abroad is more hopeful today than ever before.

However, much research remains to be conducted regarding the strengths and needs of this diverse population. A number of unique challenges and resulting clinical concerns can be posited, including healing and learning from acculturative stress, resolving intergenerational conflicts constructively, developing positive identities and a sense of belonging as Colombians and Americans, and identifying factors that promote resiliency, for example, per cultural values. Each Colombian family has a unique immigration narrative that is important to articulate and share with future generations, as can be seen in the demographic data collected through various organizations and even through the two personal narratives that began the chapter. Issues of privilege and oppression (e.g., reason for immigration, religious affiliation, SES, and educational background) clearly affect the trajectory of these narratives, leading some to be able to navigate the immigration system with greater or less difficulty, due to these systemic concerns. One common characteristic, the source of strength and pride for all Colombians is critical to know and understand, the family. Family forms both the beginning and the end of each Colombian's narrative. It is through and by family that Colombians all over the world are able to survive and thrive. As we have noted throughout the chapter, much more research is needed to better understand Colombian Americans, their struggles and successes. We hope readers of this chapter will be inspired to engage in creating greater understanding of Colombians and other Latinxs living in the United States.

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