# Colombians in the United States: A Study of Their Well-Being

## Cándida Madrigal

*Abstract: This study examined the extent to which four factors—acculturation, ethnic identity, self-esteem, and resilience—can explain the well-being of Colombian immigrants in the United States across three waves of immigration (wave 1, from 1945–1964; wave 2, from 1965–1989; and wave 3, from 1990–2008). The results indicate that of the four factors, self-esteem most correlated with and was a predictor of well-being. Participants exhibited high levels of well-being as their level of self-esteem increased. Ethnic identity negatively predicted well-being, especially for men who entered during wave 3; as the extent of their ethnic identity increased, their well-being decreased. Correspondingly, Colombians who entered as political refugees reported a lower level of well-being. This research was groundbreaking in assessing factors contributing to the well-being of Colombian immigrants and assisting in the search for appropriate scales to study this population. Although its results have to be considered with caution, the study opens doors to future research, policies, and programs regarding the mental health assessment and treatment of Colombians in the United States.*

*Keywords: Colombians, immigrants, well-being, ethnic identity, self-esteem*

People leave their country of origin for numerous reasons such as political refuge, economic advancement, religion, adventure, educational opportunities, or just to take an extended vacation (Segal, 2002; Segal, Elliott, & Mayadas, 2010). The reason for migration affects the immigrant's intent to stay permanently in another place, and may have both positive and negative consequences to the person's well-being, as the resettlement experience affects psychosocial adjustment. Many factors influence immigrant health and psychological well-being, including some specific demographic and migration characteristics, coping resources, and perceptions of life circumstances (Christopher & Aroian, 1998). Moving to a new country may contribute to improvement in the quality of life, which in turn can influence a person's psychosocial adjustment, or it can have adverse consequences, creating new unresolved psychosocial consequences for the well-being of an immigrant.

The United States of America is comprised of diverse and heterogeneous ethnic and racial groups, including those called minorities and the dominant European American majority group (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Multiculturalists view immigrants as actively participating in the shaping of their lives and consider them integral segments of American society. The well-being of immigrants has been widely documented on the basis of existing theory and research. Early research sought to better understand the relationship between conditions in society, in the family, and how healthy individuals adjust to their environments. Several models have been developed, recommended, and tested to further understand psychological and health-related outcomes for diverse immigrant groups (Abouguendia, 2001; Campbell, 1981; Christopher & Aroian, 1998; Dupuy, 1977; Kuo-Jackson, 2000; Mahoney, 2004; Phinney, 2003).

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Colombians have been arriving in the United States since the 1930s. Initially they came to advance their education or economic situations, and in some cases, to search for adventure. Since the late 1990s, they have arrived primarily to escape violent internal armed conflict. The political and economic turbulence in Colombia has involved an internal/external political crisis with an alarming connection among drug traffickers, the guerilla groups, and the paramilitary groups, who work together in attempting to control either the land or the drug trade (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003; Shifter, 1999; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012). The increasing violence, threats of extortion, kidnapping, murder, and an "undeclared civil war" have caused a large number of Colombians to leave their country in hopes of finding a safer home.

Although Colombians represent one of the largest groups of immigrants from South America in the United States, much of the research available is based on groups with ethnic labels such as "Hispanics" or "Latinos." Most of these studies are conducted with Cuban, Cuban American, Puerto Rican, mixed Mexican, or Mexican American populations; Central/South American populations combined; or under an "Other Hispanic" category (InfoPlease, 2011; Longres & Patterson, 2000; Rumbaut, 1996). Other studies have been conducted with unspecified groups of Spanish-speaking or Spanish-surnamed populations. This research approach is misleading because there are very important ethnic and cultural differences among groups, whether Latin American or Caribbean (Longres & Patterson, 2000; Rumbaut, 1996).

This article discusses acculturation, ethnic identity, resilience, and self-esteem as a framework to study the well-being of Colombian immigrants residing in the United States. It provides a background history of their reasons for leaving their country and their immigration patterns. It explains the results of the study, the limitations, as well as implications for social work practice, policy, education, and research.

## Importance of the Study

It is of prime importance to study the well-being of Latinos in the United States because their presence is significant. As of July 1, 2011, 52 million people in the United States were Latinos, representing 16.7% of the total population and making them the largest ethnic or racial minority in the country. By the year 2050, it is estimated that there will be 132.8 million Latinos in the United States, comprising 30% of the total population (InfoPlease, 2011). The connection between Latino/Hispanics and the United States extends to all areas, political, social, cultural, and economic.

It is also important to study the nationality groups individually since their immigrant trajectory may be different. This study focuses on Colombian immigrants. The greatest number of immigrants who have entered the United States from South America are Colombians, accounting for 23.3 % of the overall South American-born population in the country (Acosta & De la Cruz, 2011). However, there are limited available historical references concerning Colombian immigrants to the United States. More specifically, there is little information regarding their immigrant experience and the factors that affect their well-being in the host country. In 1999 Guarnizo, Sanchez, and Roach stated that,

"While Colombians constitute an important wave of immigrants; nonetheless they are an understudied ethnic group" (p. 5), and today, in 2013, they continue to be understudied.

Colombians play a very important role because they continue to arrive to the United States and are integral to this country. Therefore, it is appropriate to explore the immigration waves of Colombians to the United States and understand the factors that contribute to their well-being. Furthermore, because social services and financial resources for immigrants have been limited, it is imperative that the social programs developed to assist immigrants in the United States, specifically Colombians, be based on a concrete understanding of the factors that contribute to their overall well-being in the United States.

## Literature Review

### Immigration Patterns as Waves

Records show that Colombians began arriving in the United States in the 1930s when there were 1,233 Colombians residing in the country; by the 1940s this number had reached 3,858 (United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, [USINS], 1970). Although there is a consensus in the available literature about the immigration patterns of Colombians to the United States unfolding in three waves, there is a discrepancy regarding the exact periods and limited information about the reasons that led to these patterns. Collier and Gamarra (2001) list the time periods as 1950 to the end of the 1970s, late 1970s to the mid 1990s, and the mid 1990s to the present.

However, Sanchez (2003) suggests the three periods of immigration to the United States were from 1945–1965; 1966–1990; and 1991–2000. He links the time frames to the internal conditions in Colombia, the United States' immigration policies, and the overall receiving context. Nevertheless, there are indications that wave 3 extended to the year 2008, given the sociopolitical situation both in Colombia and the United States. For a detailed description of the characteristics of the migration of Colombians to the United States by wave, from 1945 to 2008, see table 1. The years between 2008 and 2013 have been impacted by different social and political situations both in the United States and Colombia, including newly elected Presidents, and the efforts of President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón (elected in 2010) to reach peace agreements with the diverse armed groups in Colombia. Specific information regarding the characteristics of this new wave of Colombian immigration to the USA, although of great interest, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 1 *Characteristics of Colombian Migration to the United States by Waves*

| WAVE | Reasons for Leaving Colombia. Pushed Factors: Conditions in Colombia | Reasons for Migrating to USA. Pulled Factors: Cultural attraction, United States' immigration policies and the overall receiving context |
|---|---|---|
| **Wave 1 1945–1965** | -Political turmoil in the country. <br> -1949. Assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a young political leader from the Liberal Party. <br> -Period known as *La Violencia*, (The Violence), a civil war between the two political parties in the country that killed more than 200,000 Colombians[1] and destroyed most of the agriculture in the country.[2] <br> -Thousands of Colombians lost their land and were forced to move to major cities.[3] <br> -Searching for a solution to this internal crisis, the elite political parties agreed on a pact that created an "exclusionary political system,"[4] which, in addition to the political violence in the country, the absence of economic opportunities, and the cultural magnetism to the United States, including financial prospects, precipitated the exit of Colombians from their country. <br> -By the 1950s, there were 18,048 Colombian nationals in the United States, and by 1960 there were 72,028 permanent Colombian residents.[5] | -Cultural magnetism to the United States, including financial prospects. <br> - The primary factors that have attracted Colombians to the United States throughout their migratory patterns include "the promise of jobs, peace, and stability. . .these immigrants have sought to escape the political violence, while searching for economic opportunities" (Collier & Gamarra, 2001, p. 4). <br> - While the unstable economic and political situation in the home country were the primary push factors, Collier and Gamarra (2001) contend that during this period individuals from the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes—primarily from the large cities of Bogotá, Medellin, and Cali—not only came in search of better economic prospects, but also to look for adventure. They state that "Colombians are risk-takers, have a sense of adventure and a history of migrating" (Collier & Gamarra, 2001, p. 3). |
| **Wave 2 1966–1990** | -The situation in Colombia got worse, both economically as well as politically <br> -By 1964, and through the 1970s, a large percentage of the country's revenue was controlled by a small number of families and the inequality and inability to earn income diminished the capacity to buy goods.[6] <br> -Levels of internal political violence in the countryside had increased. <br> -The weak political and economic conditions of the country were additionally complicated by the reality that Colombia was rising as a major manufacturer, trafficker, and provider of marijuana and cocaine[7] as well as heroin to many parts of the world. <br> -During this period, Colombia surfaced as the most important actor in the dispensation and circulation of cocaine's succession of global commodity.[8] <br> -Migration of Colombians to the United States rose significantly during this period. <br> -By the end of the 1980s, there were 122,849 Colombians residing in the United States.[9] | -Amendments to the immigration laws in the United States. <br> -The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act's 1965 amendments, which allowed every country a quota of 20,000 new immigrants per year (Collier & Gamarra, 2001, Hing, 2004) and also had a provision for family reunification (Hing, 2004) that made it possible for many relatives to immigrate, thereby, creating a great influx of Colombians and other Latin Americans during the late 1960s and 1980s (Sanchez, 2003). <br> Many Colombians who came to the United States during these years were affected by the stereotyping and stigmatizing of the drug epidemic. Colombians were often referred to as drug traffickers (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Jones-Correa, 1998; Sanchez, 2003; Tazi, 2004). This was a particular language used to support the ideas held about Colombians that created biased judgments towards all Colombians since they were perceived according to this image of drug traffickers. |

Table 1 (cont.)

| WAVE | Reasons for Leaving Colombia. Pushed Factors: Conditions in Colombia | Reasons for Migrating to USA. Pulled Factors: Cultural attraction, United States' immigration policies and the overall receiving context |
|---|---|---|
| **Wave 3 1991- 2008** | - The decade of the 1990s was marked not only by the emerging internal/external political crises in Colombia, but also by a disturbing connection among drug traffickers and the guerrilla groups, especially the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC) (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia). This group sought total power of the drug trade.[10] <br> -In August 1989, the undeclared civil war became bloodier when the drug lords gunned down Luis Carlos Galán, the leading Liberal contender for the 1990 presidential election. <br> - The economic and political turmoil in the country, the escalating violence, and the personal safety threats of extortion, kidnapping and murder predisposed many individuals and families to leave, including numerous wealthy and professional Colombians.[11] <br> -December 1993, Palo Escobar, Colombian's feared drug lord, was killed by Colombian military forces backed by the USA. <br> - 2002: Álvaro Uribe Vélez was elected 58th President of Colombia. <br> - 2006, Álvaro Uribe wins re-election for second term as president. <br> -Many credit President Uribe for his role in fighting the guerrilla groups. <br> - In 2008, there were reports that the violence in the country was decreasing. <br> -Although terrorist groups, including the FARC and other criminal organizations, continued to kidnap civilians and political people who they hold for ransom or use as bargaining when negotiating with the government, the FARC had lost several of its top leaders. <br> -The killing and capture by Colombian security of several senior guerrilla commanders and the rescue on July 2, 2008, of Colombian's ex-presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt who had been in captivity for more than 6 years, 3 government contractors from the United States, and 11 Colombian policemen and soldiers, reportedly allowed President Uribe's government to reestablish some sense of security and safety in the country, especially in the larger cities. | -The situation in Colombia during these years produced considerable apprehension for the U.S. government and its military. <br> -As a result, Colombia and the U.S. administration established "Plan Colombia" to support the Colombian government in eradicating the drugs, combating the rebel groups and strengthening the military, with millions of dollars (Collier & Gamarra, 2001, Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003; Shifter, 1999). <br> - By the 1990s, many middle, upper-middle, and upper-class individuals and trained professionals entered the United States on tourist visas but stayed without legal documents after their visas expired (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Reimers, 2005). <br> -2003. The Department of State refused to grant TPS to Colombians, stating that the home conditions had improved and that a significant number of Colombians had already been granted asylum (Reimers, 2005). <br> -If undocumented, Colombians who entered during this wave have found themselves experiencing concerns and frustrations at their inability to obtain legal status, regardless of their educational and socioeconomic background. They find it difficult to understand the U.S. system and accept that they cannot obtain licenses and permits to work in their line of business or profession. For example, they are not used to "competing for jobs based upon their qualifications; instead, they are used to gaining employment through close networks of family and friends" (Collier & Gamarra, 2001, p. 9). <br> -2008 was an election year in the United States, therefore the "Department of Homeland Security's widening immigrant round-up," and President Bush's anti-immigration laws and regime were left to be dealt with by the next administration (Barry, 2008, p. 1). |

Table 1 (cont.)

| WAVE | Reasons for Leaving Colombia. Pushed Factors: Conditions in Colombia | Reasons for Migrating to USA. Pulled Factors: Cultural attraction, United States' immigration policies and the overall receiving context |
|---|---|---|
| Wave 3 (cont.) | -Many Colombian activists worldwide called for peaceful demonstration against the guerrilla groups, the kidnappings, the violence in the country, and in favor of the release of the many other (approximately 700) Colombians who remained captive. <br> -Thus, the incidence of kidnapping reportedly decreased considerably and the dream for peace in Colombia seemed closer to being a reality facilitating the return of many Colombians. | -Given the severe consequences faced by undocumented immigrants as a result of "tighter immigration controls and security issues raised after September 11, 2001" (Bérubé, 2005, p. 1), the uncertainty of the immigration laws in the United States and the hope that the home situation would improve in Colombia, it can be said that 2008 signified the end of wave 3 of Colombian immigration to the United States. |

[1](Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Dix, 1987; Osterling, 1989; Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003); [2](Reimers, 2005); [3](Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Dix, 1987; Osterling, 1989; Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003); [4](Sanchez, 2003, p. 58); [5](United States Immigration and Naturalization Services [USINS], 1970); [6](Dix, 1987; Osterling, 1989; Sanchez, 2003); [7](Osterling, 1989; Sanchez, 2003); [8](Wilson & Zambrano, 1994); [9](USINS, 1995); [10](Collier & Gamarra, 2001, Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003; Shifter, 1999); [11](Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Reimers, 2005).

## Colombians in the United States: Present Situation

Statistics from the U.S. Census indicate that there were 471,000 documented Colombian-born immigrants residing in the country in the year 2000 (Guzmán, 2001), however, in 2003 it was estimated that there were approximately 2 million Colombians in the USA (Bérubé, 2005). Per the Migration Policy Institute tabulations from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey, there are 658,667 Colombian born residents in the United States (American FactFinder, 2011). Many contend that this is not an accurate count since it does not capture the undocumented who, because of fear of deportation, avoid the census count. Consequently, the exact number of Colombians in the United States is difficult to determine, especially through the U.S. Census (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Reimers, 2005; Sanchez, 2003).

The primary states where Colombians live are Florida, New York, and New Jersey. Table 2 shows the states with the largest Colombian population, per the Migration Policy Institute tabulations from the US Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey (American FactFinder, 2011). Despite these statistics, available empirical data regarding the reception of Colombians in the United States continue to be limited.

Table 2 *States with the Largest Colombian Population in the United States: 2011*

| State | Colombian Population 2011 |
| --- | --- |
| Florida | 228,619 |
| New York | 97,623 |
| New Jersey | 80,659 |
| California | 35,976 |
| Texas | 35,013 |
| Georgia | 20,591 |
| Massachusetts | 18,417 |
| Connecticut | 12,811 |
| Pennsylvania | 12,224 |
| Illinois | 15,260 |
| North Carolina | 11,283 |
| Virginia | 11,205 |
| Louisiana & other states | 127,773 |
| Total | 658,667 |

Data obtained with authorization from Migration Policy Institute, 2011.

There are primarily two studies that address the migration of Colombians to the United States. While Sanchez's (2003) time periods of the waves are historically linked to the domestic circumstances that surrounded their migration, his study focused mostly on the "New York context of reception" (p. 54). Collier and Gamarra (2001), on the other hand, focused on some elements of the immigration of Colombians in South Florida. Their findings were published as a white paper titled "Colombian Diaspora in South Florida" (p. 1).

Sanchez (2003) interviewed numerous community leaders and attended meetings to gather the information he presented in his dissertation. Collier and Gamarra (2001) conducted a research study, together with a team of eight students. Although they did not clearly specify the method they used to collect their data, their report concentrated primarily on the immigration experience of Colombians who arrived during wave 3. In their study, wave 3 Colombian immigrants reported that the reasons for leaving Colombia included an intricate mix of economic and political factors, but the political factors were dominant. Many economically and politically influential people in Colombia expressed their concern that the exit of these immigrants was causing a brain drain in Colombia and advocated for Colombians to stay in the country. Overall, wave 3 immigrants from the

upper classes "tend to feel that they have dropped one or more social classes since their arrival in the United States" (Collier & Gamarra, 2001, p. 9). Other studies (Duque-Páramo, 2004; Gonzalez-Eastep, 2007) explored specific issues with Colombians in particular regions in the United States, but they did not address the immigrants' experiences.

## Previous Studies on the Well-Being of Immigrants

The well-being of immigrants has been widely documented on the basis of existing theory and research. Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebind, and Vedder (2001) suggest an "international model for understanding psychological outcomes for immigration [and assertthat the] combination of a strong ethnic identity and a strong national identity promotes the best adaptation" (p. 1). They state that the relationship between the characteristics and attitudes of immigrants, in addition to the response of the host society, are the best determinants of psychological well-being. This relationship is also affected by the status of the particular immigrant group the person belongs to (Phinney et al. 2001).

The psychosocial well-being of immigrants has also been studied by using a framework of acculturation, ethnic identity, and racial identity (Kuo-Jackson, 2000). That author asserts that individuals from a minority culture must deal with four psychosocial issues: (a) conflict between cultures, (b) racism and discrimination, (c) protection of their cultural and ethnic traditions, and (d) facing/confronting their minority status (Kuo-Jackson, 2000).

Other studies have looked at the relationship between acculturation, ethnic identity, and psychological well-being with diverse communities. Abouguendia (2001) studied the acculturative stressors, ethnic identity, and psychological well-being among immigrants and second-generation individuals in the North American population. Psychological well-being has also been considered in the realm of specific demographic characteristics and life satisfaction (Christopher & Aroian, 1998). It has also been documented that ethnic identity positively correlates with well-being, self-esteem, and resilience. Zhou and Bankston (1998) found that high levels of ethnic identity and attachment were linked to behaviors that allow for stronger academic performance and greater motivation. Also, in a meta-analysis conducted by Sam (2000), a moderate but consistent relationship was found between ethnic identity and self-esteem.

Given the review of the theories and empirical studies with regard to the well-being of immigrants, and specifically Colombians in the United States, the importance of understanding immigrant adjustment to the receiving country from different theoretical perspectives has been documented. However, no research was found that studies the psychosocial well-being of immigrants from the acculturation, ethnic identity, resilience, and self-esteem perspective as proposed in this study (figure 1).

## Conceptual Framework Guiding the Present Study

In this study it was hypothesized that (a) there is a positive relationship between the well-being of the participants and their level of acculturation, self-esteem, resilience, and ethnic identity for all subjects in the sample, (b) there are different predictors of well-being for Colombians in the study sample, and (c) there are different predictors of well-being for participants in each of the waves. (See Figure 1)

Well-being, the dependent variable on which the influence of the other four factors was sought, is described as the position of being joyful, in good physical shape, or wealthy (Morris, 1981). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1948, p. 100). Psychological well-being includes emotional feelings of pleasure related to the current life experience of the individual (Campbell, 1981; Dupuy, 1977). Furthermore, psychosocial well-being addresses the relationship between conditions in society (i.e., social factors, demographic factors, SES), how healthy individuals can adjust to their environment, and the psychological state of the individual.

Acculturation is defined as the changes that groups and individuals experience when they come into contact with two or more cultures. Acculturation includes the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of the adaptation process and outcome (Williams & Berry, 1991). Although changes occur in the dominant culture and the minority group, it is usually the non-dominant or minority group that experiences the most change. The minority group often voluntarily accepts or is forced to accept the language, religion, laws, and educational institutions of the host culture. Acculturation reflects the degree of agreement with the norms, values, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences of a particular group to the host society and culture (Berry, 1990; Berry, 1992; Marino, Stuart, & Minas, 2000).

Ethnic identity is defined as the degree to which the individual understands his or her culture and is self-assured of the choices made about upholding or not upholding the country of origin's customs and values (Phinney, 1998). According to Phinney, each person's attitude toward their own cultural group is essential to their psychological well-being; therefore, ethnic identity becomes a basic part of acculturation. Ethnic identity is not a static construct and varies over an individual's life span. Phinney proposes that ethnic identity develops over time as a result of the individual's exploration and decision-making process regarding what part they want culture to play in their lives.

Resilience has been defined as the capacity to withstand life stressors, thrive, and make meaning from challenges (Greene, 2012). Cultural resilience refers to the capacity of specific human cultures to endure stressors such as contact with other cultures and disasters, and the ability to uphold critical cultural knowledge all the way through generations, regardless of challenges and complexities. Resilience is also a personal characteristic of an individual who is able to make the required psychosocial adjustments when faced with adversity (Richmind & Bearslee, 1988; Wagnild & Young, 1990).

*Figure 1* Framework of well-being of Colombian immigrants in the United States.
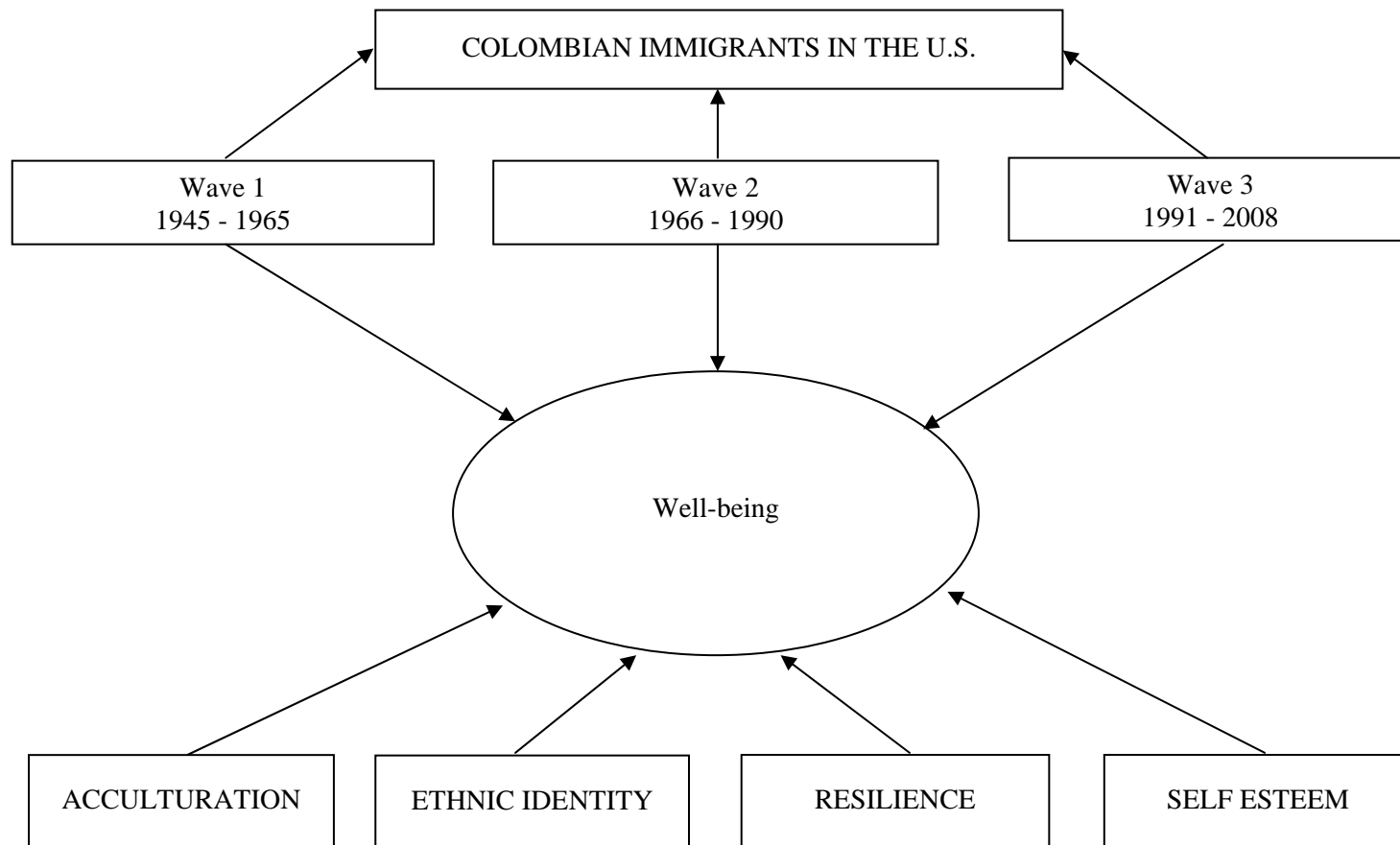
Resilience is an inferred process because it implies that the individual is presently doing fine and that there have been exceptional circumstances that threaten positive outcomes (Masten & Reed, 2002).

Self-esteem is defined as the ability to form an identity and attach a value to it (McKay & Fanning, 2000). Self-esteem has also been defined as that aspect of self-concept that evaluates the self. Hewitt (2002) posits that self-esteem has been entrenched in the psychological ideas of acceptance of the child early in life, receiving positive evaluation from people significant to the person, being compared with others in a favorable way, being compared with the ideal self, and having the ability to take successful action. He argues that self-esteem is a socially constructed emotion that could be called mood, and as such, can be an indicator of well-being.

## Method

### Research Design

This study used an exploratory survey design to examine the extent to which acculturation, ethnic identity, self-esteem, and resilience explain the well-being of Colombian immigrants in the United States across the three waves of immigration (wave 1, from 1945–1964; wave 2, from 1965–1989; and wave 3, from 1990–2008). It was hypothesized that (a) there is a positive relationship between the well-being of the participants and their level of acculturation, self-esteem, resilience, and ethnic identity for all subjects in the sample, (b) there are different predictors of well-being for Colombians in the study sample, and (c) there are different predictors of well-being for participants in each one of the immigration waves.

Because the study of Colombians in the United States is a relatively new area, especially investigating their psychosocial well-being, this exploratory study yielded new insights into the well-being of Colombians in this country. However, because of the specific research design of this study, its results cannot be statistically generalized to the population from which the data were drawn.

### Sample and Sampling Technique

For the purpose of this study, respondents born in Colombia who were 18 years old, or older, at the time of participation, who immigrated to the United States between the years 1945 and 2002, and who were 5 years old, or older, at the time of arrival were eligible to participate. It was stipulated that participants had to have arrived in the country after age 5, since, according to Park (1999), individuals who immigrated to the receiving country before the age of 5 were considered to be part of the second generation of immigrants because of the similarity to the number of years of education and socialization of the people who were actually born in the receiving country. It iwas also considered that those individuals migrated at a time when they had not been fully acculturated into their heritage (Sam, 2000).

To facilitate the collection of the data, research assistants were sought out from California, Pennsylvania, Florida and Texas. These research assistants were chosen for

their connection to the Colombian community in their respective areas and their desire to assist in collecting the data for this study. Research Assistants were given an oral orientation over the phone and guidelines in writing. The researcher prepared all documents, which were placed in brown envelopes that could be sealed. Each research assistant received the envelopes via mail. Due to the fact that they were not conducting structured interviews, but were only giving the envelopes out to the respondents and picking them up, inter-rater reliability was not considered necessary. A non-probability, snowball sampling technique was used in this study.

**Variables and Measurements**

Five scales were used in this investigation to establish instruments appropriate to study Colombians in the United States. A challenge in cross-cultural research is obtaining reliable and valid instruments that are not culturally biased. Despite an extensive literature review, as reported earlier, no validated measures were found that tested all of the specific variables used in this study with Colombians; therefore, well-being, the dependent variable (DV), was tested using the General Well-Being Schedule (GWB), (Taylor, et al., 2003) a schedule used to measure the well-being of a number of different populations. The independent variables and the respective measures were Acculturation (Modified Marino Acculturation Scale for Colombians [Marino et al., 2000]), Ethnic Identity (Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure *[MEIM],* Phinney, 1992), Resilience (Resilience Scale [Wagnild & Young, 1987, 1990]), and Self-Esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [Rosenberg, 1965]).

**Statistical Analysis**

The data were entered and analyzed using the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (e.g., *M, SD*, frequencies) were computed and a Pearson product moment correlational matrix was generated for all variables, for all three waves, to determine if level of acculturation, ethnic identity, resilience, self-esteem, and well-being are correlated; and if so, the strength of this correlation and which characteristics are significantly correlated. Also, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine what amount of variation in well-being is accounted for by the degrees of acculturation, ethnic identity, resilience, and self-esteem, whether this differs by wave, and if any of these variables are significant predictors of well-being for the studied population.

## Study Findings

**Demographic Characteristics**

Two hundred and forty-eight questionnaires as designed for this study were returned to this researcher, that is, 24.8 % of the approximate total number of questionnaires distributed. The geographical distribution of the sample is as follows: 97 (39.1%) of the respondents resided in Florida, 72 (29%) in California, 40 (16.1%) in Pennsylvania and 39 (15.7%) in Texas. The final sample consisted of 30 (12.1%) participants from wave 1, 133 (53.6%) from wave 2, and 85 (34.3%) from wave 3. Their ages ranged from 19 to 79

years old. The median age for the participants in the study was 48 years. The range of the participants' ages at the time of entering the United States was from 5.5 to 67 years; the median age being 25, and the mode 18 years. However, due to missing data and participants not responding to some questions because they felt it did not apply to them, many questionnaires could not be used for statistical analysis.

## Statistical Findings

A Pearson's correlation co-efficient was calculated for the relationship between all subjects in the sample, the well-being of the participants, and their level of acculturation, self-esteem, resilience, and ethnic identity. Two positive and significant relationships were found for resilience ($r$ (106) = 0.194, $p < 0.05$) and self-esteem ($r(106)=0.397$, $p <0.01$), indicating that resilience and self-esteem are correlated with well-being for all participants in the sample (see table 3).

Table 3 *Correlation Between Well-Being and All Independent Variables: All Participants (N = 108)*

|  |  | Well-Being | Resilience | Self-Esteem | Ethnic Identity | Acculturation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Well-Being | Pearson Correlation | 1.000 | 0.194[*] | 0.397[**] | -0.076 | -0.162 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 | 0.044 | 0.000 | 0.434 | 0.094 |
| Resilience | Pearson Correlation | 0.194[*] | 1.000 | 0.219[*] | 0.155 | -0.325[**] |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.044 | 0.000 | 0.023 | 0.109 | 0.001 |
| Self-Esteem | Pearson Correlation | 0.397[**] | 0.219[*] | 1.000 | 0.269[**] | -0.106 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 | 0.023 | 0.000 | 0.005 | 0.276 |
| Ethnic Identity | Pearson Correlation | -0.076 | 0.155 | 0.269[**] | 1.000 | -0.188 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.434 | 0.109 | 0.005 | 0.000 | 0.051 |
| Acculturation | Pearson Correlation | -0.162 | -0.325[**] | -0.106 | -0.188 | 1.000 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.094 | 0.001 | 0.276 | 0.051 | 0.000 |

 \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To determine if any of the independent variables were significant predictors of well-being for Colombians in the study sample, a multiple linear regression was performed (see table 4) controlling for all independent variables (resilience, ethnic identity, self-esteem, and acculturation). Regression results ($R^2=0.225$, $R^2$adj=0.195, $F[4,104]=7.493$, $p <0.05$) showed that some of the independent variables in the model are significant predictors. Per the results, it can be concluded that all four independent variables account for 22.5% of the variance in well-being. The results indicated not only that self-esteem significantly predicts well-being for all Colombians in the study, but also that there is a significant but negative relationship between ethnic identity and well-being. Participants' well-being increased by 1.461 units for each unit increase of self-esteem. Furthermore,

the results indicated that Colombians' well-being decreases by -.484 for each unit increase of ethnic identity.

Table 4 *Multiple Linear Regression—Well-Being (DV) and Acculturation, Self-Esteem, Resilience, Ethnic Identity (IV): All Participants (N = 108)*

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | *t* | Sig. |
| (Constant) | 49.635 | 20.354 | --- | 2.439 | 0.016 |
| Acculturation | -0.115 | 0.083 | -0.129 | -1.394 | 0.166 |
| Self-Esteem | 1.461 | 0.315 | 0.424 | 4.632 | 0.000 |
| Resilience | 0.058 | 0.057 | 0.095 | 1.012 | 0.314 |
| Ethnic Identity | -0.484 | 0.193 | -0.229 | -2.507 | 0.014 |

To determine if there is a significant predictor of well-being for those individuals by wave, a multiple linear regression was performed, controlling for other independent variables (resilience, self-esteem, ethnic identity, and acculturation). Regression results ($R^2$=0.388, $R^2$adj=0.304, $F$ [4, 29]=4.596, $p$ <0.05), indicated that for wave 3, the overall model significantly predicts well-being (see table 5). This model accounts for 38.8 % of the variance in well-being. The results revealed that self-esteem significantly predicts well-being for all Colombians who entered the United States during wave 3. Additionally, there is a significant but negative relationship between ethnic identity and well-being. Per the results, it can be concluded that participants' well-being increased by 1.580 units for each unit increase of self-esteem when all other IVs are held constant. Furthermore, the results indicated that the well-being of Colombians in wave three decreases by -0.907 units for each unit increase of ethnic identity when all other IVs are held constant.

Table 5 *Multiple Linear Regression—Well-Being- (DV) and Acculturation, Self-Esteem, Resilience, Ethnic Identity (IV): Wave 3(N = 34)*

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | *t* | Sig. |
| (Constant) | 45.455 | 44.757 | --- | 1.016 | 0.318 |
| Resilience | 0.125 | 0.097 | 0.246 | 1.282 | 0.210 |
| Self-Esteem | 1.580 | 0.771 | 0.394 | 2.048 | 0.050 |
| Ethnic Identity | -0.907 | 0.315 | -0.486 | -2.883 | 0.007 |
| Acculturation | -0.072 | 0.161 | -0.080 | -0.448 | 0.658 |

To determine if there are any differences by gender, a multiple linear regression was performed (see table 6) to determine whether any of the four independent variables (resilience, ethnic identity, self-esteem, and acculturation) was a significant predictor of well-being for Colombians, divided by gender. The results ($R^2$=0.377, $R^2$adj=0.316, $F$ [4, 41] = 6.1936, $p$ <0.05) indicated that the overall model significantly predicts well-being for male participants in the study. This model accounts for 37.7.0% of the variance in well-being. Per the results, not only does self-esteem significantly predict well-being for all Colombian men in the sample, but also there is a significant but negative relationship between ethnic identity and well-being for male participants. It can be concluded that male participants' well-being increased by 1.687 units for each unit increase of self-esteem when all other IVs were held constant. Furthermore, the results indicated that the well-being of the Colombian men decreases by -0.975 units for each unit increase of ethnic identity when all other IVs are held constant.

Table 6 *Multiple Linear Regression\*—Well-Being (DV) and Acculturation, Self-Esteem, Resilience, Ethnic Identity (IV): Men (N = 48)*

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
| (Constant) | 69.207 | 30.444 | --- | 2.273 | 0.028 |
| Resilience | 0.073 | 0.068 | 0.147 | 1.079 | 0.287 |
| Self-Esteem | 1.687 | 0.476 | 0.489 | 3.546 | 0.001 |
| Ethnic Identity | -0.975 | 0.291 | -0.465 | -3.348 | 0.002 |
| Acculturation | -0.175 | 0.121 | -0.199 | -1.446 | 0.156 |

This study also looked at the well-being of Colombians who entered the United States as political refugees to determine if the way Colombians entered the country was a predictor of well-being for all participants in the study, and divided by wave. A multiple linear regression was performed. When designating "political refugee" as the referent group, and all others as the base group, regression results ($R^2$=0.319, $R^2$adj=0.283, $F$ [5, 95] = 8.898, $p$ <0.05) indicated that the overall model significantly predicts well-being and accounts for 31.9% of the variance in well-being (see table 7). The results denoted that there is a negative relationship between well-being and having entered as a political refugee, -17.140 units lower than Colombians with other entry statuses.

To determine if there was a significant relationship between well-being and entering as a political refugee by wave, a multiple linear regression was performed controlling for all independent variables. Colombians who entered as political refugees between the years 1966 and 1990 reported a lower level of well-being. Regression results ($R^2$=0.343, $R^2$adj 0.279, $F$ [5, 51] =5.330, $p$ <0.05) indicated that there is a negative relationship between well-being and having entered as a political refugee during wave 2 (see table 8).

Table 7 *Multiple Linear Regression—Well-Being (DV) and Acculturation, Self-Esteem, Resilience, Ethnic Identity, Entry Status—Political Refugee (IV): All Participants (N = 101)*

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | *t* | Sig. |
| (Constant) | 45.146 | 19.776 | --- | 2.283 | 0.025 |
| Acculturation | -0.129 | 0.081 | -0.145 | -1.591 | 0.115 |
| Ethnic Identity | -0.452 | 0.196 | -0.208 | -2.302 | 0.024 |
| Self-Esteem | 1.679 | 0.310 | 0.492 | 5.418 | 0.000 |
| Resilience | 0.052 | 0.055 | 0.086 | 0.938 | 0.351 |
| Dummy entry status-PR | -17.140 | 5.353 | -0.275 | -3.202 | 0.002 |

Table 8 *Multiple Linear Regression—Well-Being (DV) and Acculturation, Self-esteem, Resilience, Ethnic Identity, Entry Status- Political Refugee (IV): Wave 2 (N = 57)*

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | *t* | Sig. |
| (Constant) | 47.969 | 23.952 | --- | 2.003 | 0.051 |
| Acculturation | -0.167 | 0.101 | -0.199 | -1.664 | 0.102 |
| Ethnic Identity | -0.064 | 0.266 | -0.029 | -0.242 | 0.810 |
| Self-Esteem | 1.427 | 0.382 | 0.455 | 3.736 | 0.000 |
| Resilience | 0.033 | 0.071 | 0.055 | 0.463 | 0.645 |
| Entry status-Political Refugee | -23.483 | 6.787 | -0.402 | -3.460 | 0.001 |

The overall model accounts for 34.3% of the variance in well-being. It can be concluded that Colombians who entered the United States as political refugees during wave 2 report a decrease in well-being, -23.483 units lower than Colombians who entered with other statuses.

## Discussion

As stated earlier, this study examined the extent to which acculturation, ethnic identity, self-esteem, and resilience explain the well-being of Colombian immigrants in the United States across the three waves of immigration, that is, wave 1, years 1945–1964; wave 2, years 1965–1989; and wave 3, years 1990–2008.

The participants in this study represented a diverse sample of Colombian immigrants in the United States, as evidenced by the demographic characteristics previously presented. The findings show that self-esteem correlated with and was a predictor of well-being. Participants in the sample, both as a group and divided by waves, exhibited high levels of well-being as their level of self-esteem increased. Additionally, significant variance was found in the well-being of Colombians in the study. In previous studies done with Latinos (Gonzalez-Eastep, 2007), self-esteem has had a strong correlation with family functioning (Green & Way, 2005), ethnic-racial identity (Phinney, 1992), and having good family support and high family functioning (Gonzalez-Eastep 2007); but given the strong association, researchers have wondered if the reported high levels of self-esteem have been a barrier against the effects of other variables, in this case, acculturation, ethnic identity, and resilience.

The results of the present study indicate that ethnic identity negatively predicts well-being for all participants in the sample, and for Colombian men who entered the United States during wave 3 specifically; consequently, to the extent that their ethnic identity increased, their well-being decreased. Thus, male participants from wave 3 seem to have a strong identity with the Colombian culture or ethnic group, but this identity seems to create a decrease of well-being.

Studies have found that ethnic identity decreased between first- and second-generation immigrants (Buriel, 1987), and that an increase in acculturation to the host culture leads to a decrease of identity with one's own culture. Only first-generation Colombians participated in this study, and their degree of acculturation was not significant. It can be concluded that the men in this study, as first-generation immigrants, did not show a significant degree of acculturation to the mainstream society due to a strong attachment to their ethnic group, which in turn negatively affected their well-being. Although a strong ethnic identity can be a safeguard for experiences of racial discrimination (Cross, 1995), it can also be an impediment to well-being.

The finding that ethnic identity has a significant but negative effect on well-being was not expected, but can be explained 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.

In the present study, the well-being of Colombians who entered the United States as political refugees was lower than Colombians with other entry statuses. Given the continued violence in Colombia, these findings are not surprising. This specific study did not ask any other questions regarding the exposure to trauma; therefore there is no other reference to the degree of suffering or the respondents' attempts to seek mental health services. After further analysis, men who entered during wave 2 as political refugees reported a lower level of well-being. Although Colombians have lived amid violence for more than 40 years, the literature points out that it was in the late 1980s (last part of wave

2) and the 1990s (wave 3) that most Colombians sought to leave the country because of the violence.

**Limitations**

This study used a snowball sampling technique; therefore the results may be biased towards one group of respondents with similar characteristics. The questionnaire presented limitations due to its length and did not have an option of "not applicable" which could have helped reduce the large number of missing data. The scales used were developed in the English language and were validated with other ethnic groups. Additionally, the use of triangulation, including one-on-one interviews, would have yielded more in-depth responses and provided richer information about the immigrant trajectory.

## Conclusion

Given the many challenges immigrants face before and after immigration, social workers need to be prepared to serve this population at the individual and macro levels, particularly given the existing stereotypes and polarized views about immigrants and the impact they have on the country.

As the social work profession is challenged to gain a further understanding of diversity, social workers need to be culturally sensitive and competent to work effectively with clients and people from all different backgrounds. Latinos, as a group, share many characteristics, however upon closer examination, those born in South American exhibit great variations according to the country of birth (Migration Policy Institute, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary to examine, treat, and study Latino groups individually, as proposed in the literature (Kouyoumdjian, Zamboanga, & Hansen, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996), and not solely as a collective ethnic group.

A significant contribution of this investigation was the inclusion of variables not previously explored with Colombians in the United States. Additionally, this research was innovative in assessing the factors contributing to the well-being of Colombian immigrants and in the search for scales that are appropriate to study this population. Although the results have to be considered with caution, the study opens doors to future research and the provision of human services for Colombians in the United States.

The findings of this study suggest that in working with Colombians, it is important to keep in mind that their well-being is impacted by their self-esteem and their ethnic identity, especially for Colombian men.

With this in mind, social work educators have the professional responsibility to train social workers to understand an immigrant's pre-departure experiences and the relationship between an immigrant's adjustment and his or her subsequent well-being. Specific to Colombian immigrants, it is important that social workers understand, plan, and implement appropriate services for these clients. For example, many Colombian immigrants suffered the consequences of the undeclared civil war in their country; therefore, they may experience PTSD or other mental illnesses that require special mental

health programs. Clearly, there is also a need for social workers to be familiar with immigration laws and policies to be able to advocate for immigrants and to assist in policy development and implementation that will address the specific needs of Colombians and other immigrants.

Future research is needed to measure the generational status of Colombians and assess their psychosocial well-being. It would be of great interest to further study the plight of the Colombian political refugees in the United States and what kind of services are available for this population.

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