In Between Two Worlds: Colombian Migrants Negotiating Identity, Acculturation, and Settlement in Melbourne, Australia

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Latin American immigration experiences have been documented in terms of acculturation, settlement and belonging. While there is an increase in research interest, there is a need to recognise the diversity of the Latin American region, as well as within countries, in terms of culture, history, and histories of colonialism. This exploratory qualitative work examines the experiences of 15 Colombian immigrants living in Melbourne, Australia and considers implications for identity, acculturation and settlement. Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews generated three themes that represent their acculturation and settlement: identity negotiation between home and homeland, constructing Colombian identity in Australia and navigating barriers to settlement. Migration was mainly experienced as a loss and represented as a negotiation between home country and host country where the structures of support were crucial in making home in Australia. This has shed light on the meanings, expectations and challenges associated with the migration process to Australia. This analysis reveals how accents, cultural values, and discrimination play a role in the ways Colombians construct and negotiate identity and settlement in Australia.

This paper focuses on Colombian immigrants to Australia who comprise a small but rapidly growing group. “The first records of Colombians in Australia date back to four people included in the 1911 Census” (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015, para. 24). The Department of Social Services (2015, para. 5) reports that “the latest census in 2011 recorded 11,318 Colombia-born people in Australia, an increase of 98.2% from the 2006 census. Considering that Australia provides opportunities for students and professionals, recent Colombian migrants usually come under a student visa, skilled migration visa or partner visa. In view of the growing number of Colombian immigrants, the study explored the reasons for migration and the various factors that would influence the acculturation and settlement experiences for a sample of Colombian migrants to Melbourne, Australia.

Migration, Acculturation, and Settlement

Migration, acculturation and settlement are challenging processes. “Migration implies constant mobility and instability, an often-endless search for belonging to the constantly changing other, as well as having to cope with constantly shifting legal and bureaucratic requirements for social acceptance and divergent parameters for recognition” (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2008, p. 98). Sonn and Lewis (2009, p. 116) note that: “the experiences of immigration and settlement are ongoing, and often involve dislocation and the loss of taken for granted resources and systems of meaning. It also means gaining new opportunities for participation and resources for living”. The challenges of immigration and settlement for migrant communities have often been understood using the notion acculturation (Sam & Berry, 2006). Acculturation is “the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 146). Researchers in community psychology have argued that acculturation is
a contested process that involves relations of power between migrant and receiving communities which are typically reflected in experiences of exclusion, discrimination, as well as the pursuit of a sense of community and well-being (e.g., Garcia-Ramírez, de la Mata, Paloma, & Hernández-Plaza 2011; Luque-Ribelles, Herrera-Sanchez, & García-Ramírez, 2017; Sonn & Lewis, 2009, Sonn & Stevens, 2017).

Some scholars have theorised acculturation as a process of identity and community making. The process involves more than the simple negotiation of host and home culture; it is contested within and between different communities and contexts along various structural dimensions and social group memberships based on race, ethnicity, migration status, class, gender and intersections among these dimensions (Andreouli, 2013; Buckingham et al., 2018).

Some researchers have shown how cultural racism shapes the experiences of various migrant communities who are made strange and deemed as not belonging to Australia because they are not white (e.g., Due & Riggs, 2010; Hage, 1999; Harris, 2009; Sonn & Lewis, 2009; Wise, 2010). For example, Sonn and Lewis (2009) illustrate how ideologies of race and ethnicity are prominent in how South African migrants construct identities, and how memories of racism in their home country as well as experiences of being racialised based on appearance, hair, and skin colour in Australia influence how they define themselves and the extent to which they can claim belonging in Australia. In a study with people of Cypriot-Turkish Muslim background, Ali and Sonn (2010) reported that experiences of ethnicisation based on appearance, or visible markers such as wearing a veil or a hijab may mediate experiences of belonging and exclusion. In other contexts, such as the UK (Andreouli & Howarth, 2013) and Italy (Cicognani, Sonn, Albanesi, & Zani, 2018) researchers have similarly shown how language, accent, dress, and other markers can be used in processes of othering which create borders to group membership and impacts upon acculturation, participation in everyday settings, and opportunities for belonging.

Nevertheless, people do not simply submit to cultural racism and othering, they develop various psychosocial strategies of resistance, coping, and resilience. Sonn and Fisher (2003) and more recently, Sonn, Ivey, Baker and Meyer (2017) have shown how South African immigrants to Australia respond in different ways to experiences of racism including rejecting negative and externally imposed identity labels, constructing alternative identity categories, and constructing hyphenated identities and understandings of self. Racialised migrants are proactive in acculturation-settlement experiences as they negotiate changing social, political, and cultural landscapes (Bhatia, 2018; Katsiaficas, Futch, Fine, & Sirin 2011; Sonn et al., 2017). Communities construct alternative settings away from unreceptive dominant group spaces, and in those settings they can deconstruct racialised encounters and find support and communality. They also provide opportunities for people to articulate memories from their home communities that are vital to the acculturation-settlement process and for crafting multi-layered selves and ways to belonging (Hall, 2000; Katsiaficas, et al., 2011; Sonn & Fisher, 1998).

When migrants arrive and try to settle in a new place, they carry traditions, memories and experiences of the places they used to live. These memories and experiences play an important role in the acculturation and settlement experience. For example, in the United States Bhatia (2007) showed that Indian migrant’s memories of home, colonial histories and the accompanying nostalgia influence how they think about themselves in the host country and in the development of their identity and negotiation of their belonging. In Italy, Barbieri, Zani, and Sonn (2014) have highlighted that migrant adaptation is a negotiation between and within cultures; migrants bring symbols, practices and rituals from their culture while at the same time they appropriate new symbols from the new
culture. For instance, for immigrants, the term community may have different meanings related mainly to religion, culture (language, food, music) and a common past. Hence, in the process of acculturation, they relate community principally with their home country.

Although, memories of home can be a source of strength, recollecting experiences of oppression, violence, and stigmatisation can influence acculturation and identity construction in a new place (Collier & Gamarra, 2001; Guarnizo, Sánchez & Roach, 1999; Moriah, Rodriguez, & Sotomayor, 2004; Valderrama-Echavarria, 2014). For example, in research with Colombian migrants in the United States, Moriah et al. (2004), have suggested that, “a long history of violence, distrust, narco-trafficking, armed conflict, poverty, corruption, and social exclusion has diminished Colombians abilities to accurately mobilise through networks, to coordinate efforts and to act for mutual benefit” (p. 11-12). Others have noted that dominant stereotypes that associate Colombia with drug trafficking have implications for identity construction of people who migrate (Guarnizo et al., 1999). For example, Valderrama-Echavarria (2014) suggested that many Colombians reported feeling shame with the notion of Colombia associated with drug cartels or violence. These stereotypes of Colombia can manifest in people’s acculturation dynamics in particular the process of identity construction.

Given this review, the understanding that acculturation and identity construction is the process of meaning making in social ecological context and the paucity of research studies on Colombian migrants in Australia, this present exploratory study aimed to shed light on the experiences of Colombians who have migrated to Australia. The paper addresses the following questions: 1) why do Colombia people immigrate to Australia and why do they choose to stay; and 2) what factors influence acculturation experiences and social identity construction?

Methodology

Building on similar previous studies with different immigrant groups in Australia (Ali & Sonn, 2010; Sonn & Lewis, 2009; Sonn, Stevens, & Duncan, 2013), this study was guided by the assumptions that people and culture are intertwined and that realities are constructed socially through language and thereafter are maintained through narrative (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In this approach the stories that people tell about themselves and others are constructed within social, cultural, historical and political contexts (Rappaport, 2000) are in line with an interpretivist epistemology (Willig, 2013), which claims that humans always negotiate and give meaning to the dynamics of their world, and focuses on the meanings that interviewees attach to their experiences (Williamson, 2002). For this reason, adopting an interpretivist approach to this study allows consideration of the meanings migrants attach to their experiences. These stories provide a window into how Colombians make sense of their identity and belonging; their words, voices, and the discourses that they navigate as part of their acculturation process.

Participants

All participants were recruited through the networks of the first author, who is Colombian and lives in Australia, by ‘word of mouth’. No rewards or payments were offered. All interested participants were directed to contact the student researcher via telephone, text message, email or messaging via Facebook. Those who expressed interest were given detailed information about the research, its purpose, and the nature of the question. Participants were informed that potential emotional discomfort may occur, and that they can withdraw at any stage of the process, as well any additional time was given for any questions or concerns.

A total of 15 Colombian immigrants in Melbourne participated in the study: nine women and six men. The ages of the sample ranged from 25 to 45 years old. The majority of participants were born in Colombia, except for one male participant, who moved to Colombia from Venezuela at the age of one and who is a Colombian citizen. Eleven participants were from Bogotá, two from
Medellin, and one from San Gil. All the participants identified themselves as Colombian. They have lived most of their lives in urban areas in Colombia, especially Bogotá and Medellin. At the time of the study, all 15 participants were residing in Melbourne. The participants had been in Australia between one year and 16 years. In relation to migration status: five participants were already Australian citizens; five were permanent residents; one is in the process of gaining permanent residency; two currently hold a student visa; one is dependent on her partner’s student visa; and one holds a temporary graduate visa. All but two participants had tertiary education, and most were employed in technical and professional roles (Table 1).

**Data Collection**

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on previous studies (Ali & Sonn, 2010; Sonn et al., 2017) to guide one-to-one interviews that averaged 30 to 50 minutes. The interview guide included open-ended questions that were pilot tested with three Colombian people to ensure feasibility, face validity, and efficient ordering.

Fourteen interviews were conducted face-to-face and one was conducted using Skype, as was the preference of one of the participants. While most of the participants can communicate in English, Spanish is their first language. Given this, participants had the option to be interviewed in Spanish or English, and information to participants and consent forms were available in both languages. All participants decided to be interviewed in Spanish, except one person who decided to respond in English. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. At the completion of this process, the interviews in Spanish were professionally transcribed by a Colombian native Spanish speaker. To ensure that the translation was functionally equivalent, the first author checked that transcriptions against the original audio recording (Brislin, 1970). A native English speaker transcribed the interview that was conducted in English and the researchers checked it against the audio recording to ensure accuracy.

**Data Analysis**

With a focus on the reasons for migration and for staying in Australia, and factors that influence acculturation experiences and social identity construction, data was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). Verbatim transcripts were used for analysis: the first author of this manuscript who is fluent in Spanish and English languages read the transcripts several times to familiarise with the responses and the content. Descriptive labels created emergent coding, followed by categories refined by both authors. A final set of main themes were generated and summaries of these were sent to participants to gain additional input as part of the process of member checking. All the participants agreed with themes and accentuated that their status as immigrants mean that they will continue to feel “between” Colombia and Australia.

**Findings and Interpretation**

The findings suggest that participants had similar motivations for leaving Colombia and choosing to remain in Australia. The main themes generated from the interviews show that acculturation and settlement is a contested and challenging process and that physical and cultural displacement creates a sense of being “in-between worlds” for migrants. This sense of being in between involves the process of cultural remooring and navigating various social and symbolic representations and mechanisms of structural exclusion. The themes identified are: 1) “I don’t feel from here, but I don’t feel Colombian either”; 2) “I love my cultural identity”: Constructing Colombian identity in Australia; and 3) Settlement: Accents, cultural values, and discrimination. Verbatim excerpts are used to illustrate themes. Participants’ real names are replaced by pseudonyms.

The socio-political factors that make people leave a country for another country are diverse. Migration is the result of push and press factors (Krishnakumar & Indumathi, 2014; Phizacklea, 2000). The reasons why Colombians migrate to Australia, as well as the reasons to stay in Australia are shown in Table 2. The findings
### Table 1. Participant’s demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>City-Country</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation in Australia</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Venezuela/Cali-Colombia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Hispanic-Latino</td>
<td>Degree of Business Administration, Colombia</td>
<td>Systems Project Officer</td>
<td>De facto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic-Latina</td>
<td>Master of Science in Public Policy and Management, Australia</td>
<td>Spanish tutor</td>
<td>De facto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Medellin-Colombia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Master of Accounting / Commerce, Australia</td>
<td>IT Consultant</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilar</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Master of Education, Australia</td>
<td>Spanish teacher</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Warehouse</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Petroleum Engineering degree, Colombia</td>
<td>Shoe store manager</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susana</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Master of Counseling, Australia</td>
<td>Counseling and Wellbeing Coordinator</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberto</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Medellin-Colombia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Latino, Colombian, mestizo</td>
<td>Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering, Australia</td>
<td>Warehouse assistant</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Colombian</td>
<td>Master of Environmental Education, Spain</td>
<td>Public servant</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>San Gil-Colombia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Colombian</td>
<td>Master of Public Policy and Management, Australia</td>
<td>Own business</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mestiza</td>
<td>PhD (Science), Australia</td>
<td>Researching</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristina</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bogotá-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mestiza</td>
<td>Master of Energy Efficient and Sustainable Building, Australia</td>
<td>Marketing and maintenance of an IT web store</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valentina</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Medellin-Colombia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mestiza</td>
<td>Master of Urban Planning, Colombia</td>
<td>Own business</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2. Colombian migrants’ reasons for migrating to and remaining in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Time in Australia</th>
<th>Current Visa</th>
<th>Reason to leave Colombia</th>
<th>Why Australia?</th>
<th>Reason to stay in Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td>8 y</td>
<td>Australian Citizen</td>
<td>Lack of opportunities</td>
<td>English Studies/Australian Partner</td>
<td>Opportunities, Australian culture, economic stability, Australian partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>8 y</td>
<td>Australian Citizen</td>
<td>Social and political situation in Colombia</td>
<td>English studies/Clear migration policies</td>
<td>Australian values, equality, safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José</td>
<td>10 y</td>
<td>Australian Citizen</td>
<td>English Studies</td>
<td>English Studies/friend in Australia</td>
<td>Safety/Job stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilar</td>
<td>7 y</td>
<td>Australian Citizen</td>
<td>Social and political situation in Colombia</td>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td>Safety, Society, collaboration, respect, freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel</td>
<td>11 y</td>
<td>Permanent Residency</td>
<td>Social and political situation</td>
<td>English studies</td>
<td>Safety, Australian culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>11 y</td>
<td>Permanent Residency</td>
<td>Abusive relationship</td>
<td>English studies/family in Australia</td>
<td>Easy to develop projects, freedom, equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco</td>
<td>6 y</td>
<td>Temporarily Graduate Visa-485</td>
<td>Develop as a person</td>
<td>Tertiary studies</td>
<td>Safety/Australian culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>1 time: 10 m 2 time: 2 y 2 m</td>
<td>Permanent Residency</td>
<td>English Studies</td>
<td>English Studies</td>
<td>Australian partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susana</td>
<td>1 y 7 m</td>
<td>Student Visa</td>
<td>Social and political situation in Colombia</td>
<td>Quality of life/Migration/Tertiary studies/weather</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberto</td>
<td>4 y</td>
<td>Student Visa</td>
<td>English studies</td>
<td>English studies/family in Australia</td>
<td>Economic and social system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>16 y</td>
<td>Australian Citizen</td>
<td>Threats of violence</td>
<td>English studies/weather</td>
<td>Opportunities, economic stability, quality of life, equality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
show that for five of the participants social and political factors propelled them to leave and that education made it possible to go to Australia. The majority of participants also reported that they have no intention of returning to Colombia because of safety and security and the freedoms offered to pursue their life goals in Australia. This narrative is consistent with the stories of many other voluntary and involuntary migrants in Australia.

“I Don’t Feel From Here, But I Don’t Feel Colombian Either”

The migration and settlement are rewarding, but it is also very demanding of people’s psychological, social and cultural resources. For many the process involves intense challenges generated by feeling torn between a host and a home community. Participants described various tensions and challenges in Australia, including the notion of an ‘in between status’ (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). They feel in between the two worlds and that this is an ongoing process of negotiating displacement.

The of sense of being in-between can be observed as a recognition of the slow process of adjustment and various psychological, social and cultural aspects that people need to negotiate. The excerpts below illustrate that acculturation is a negotiation process reflected in being “in-between worlds”. The process for the participants revealed shared aspects such as the deep sense of their cultural identities and the slowness of acquiring ways of thinking and behavioural repertories.

As time goes by, I feel more Australian, obviously there would be things that never change and that will be always part of my identity. As an identity I feel Colombian, but I am very grateful to Australia and I have been adopting different ways of thinking and adjust to their lifestyle (Antonio).

Teresa noted that:

My resettlement and adjustment processes have been long, I believe I am still in these processes. At this stage I feel part of the place but not of the Australian culture. I know the streets, the neighbourhoods, different places and I have friends, but I do not feel Australian. I don’t feel part of the Australian culture. I believe that it is a much longer process, and it will take a lot of time (Teresa).

Another participant highlighted a partial sense of belonging: I feel partial Australian, ...well because of my studies here I feel part of Australia and part of the world however, because I don’t have permanent residency in a certain way, I don’t feel connected to Australia, but I believe it is just for bureaucratic hurdles (Francisco).

The process of negotiating belonging was not only from the position of settling in Australia but also from how they are perceived in Colombia or by Colombians once they return home to visit:

When I visited Colombia, I went to buy shoes, and somebody asked me: Where are you from? I answered I am from Bogotá (Colombia’s capital city), then the person told me: but you have an accent. I just said I was born and raised three blocks from here... I think with these situations you realise your identity... At my parents’ neighbourhood and for my friends in Colombia, I am Australian... for them I am no longer Colombian (Sara).

The analysis identified various ways in which Colombians conveyed a sense of being ‘in-between’ worlds, which included place, culture, and structures. As Fortier (2000) stated, “Immigrant populations vacillate between ‘national identity’ and ‘e’migre’ identity’, producing a cultural citizenship that is grounded in multilocality” (p. 97).

“I Love my Cultural Identity”:
Constructing Colombian Identity in Australia

The migration process involves renegotiating taken for granted identities and the range of symbolic and material resources that they draw upon in this process. The various excerpts below include the reference to cultural values and practice, language, and shared history which are all central to a
strong sense of Colombian cultural identification. For example, Alberto stated: 
I love my cultural identity because it is different, and Australian people like it, we bring nice things here, the culture, the food, the music and we share our history, that Latino part, that Colombian part that we have, we are proud to represent Colombia here (Alberto).

Teresa made similar comments about the role of culture contributing to the aliveness of countries, noting:
I think about my identity as the identity of any immigrant. It is an asset to Australia; it is what is building the country. In other words, as a Colombian and as an immigrant I provide my culture, which makes this country alive. It is what gives colour to Australia.

Sara mentioned that shared emotional connection amongst the Colombian diaspora around the world:
I think there is not a Colombian that will deny their identity, in spite of the violent stories, our identity is deeply rooted, our sense of belonging is stronger than the Australians sense of belonging. We give our lives for Colombia and we cry every time we listen our national anthem, here Australians barely know the lyrics of their anthem. Also, our sense of community is extremely strong... the sense of belonging is so strong that it doesn’t matter where you are in this world you will have it.

One participant used the term Colombianidad¹ to explain how, over time, there may be a ‘lessening’ of an ‘authentic’ Colombian identity but a rearticulation of it in a different way in Australia. This is captured in the excerpt from Manuel who speaks of loss and reclamation, and rearticulating ways of being Colombian, never fixed, but always changing:
I mean I see myself as a Colombian, but... because I have been here for a very long time, I have lost my “Colombianidad”, and you always see people very Colombian in Australia. I haven’t experienced enough that Colombian culture, therefore, I can feel Colombian but in the eyes of others I am less Colombian. For example, I don’t follow the Colombian football team, I don’t have the Colombian team T-shirt, I don’t use Colombian handicrafts, and I don’t use the sombrero vueltiao². For me that it is not related to being Colombian, I think I live my Colombianidad in a different way (Manuel).

Yet, while many embraced Colombian cultural identity, some participants also referred to the aspects that they do not like about Colombia nor of being from Colombia. Although most participants describe being proud of their Colombian heritage, one participant reported feeling shame:
Being Colombian is a birthmark, a bad birthmark in the forehead. I don’t identify with the culture of Colombia. I don’t catch up with Colombian people, I don’t celebrate Colombian festivities... and for me Colombia is a place far away, there is my mum, she is the only link that I have with Colombia, the family that I have over there (Pilar).

Unlike other participants, Pilar distanced herself from Colombia. She uses the metaphor of a stain, a bad birthmark. Pilar feels out of place in both Australia and Colombia. Responses from other participants are also instructive about how people negotiate negative stereotypes about Colombia. For instance, Manuel commented:
People ask always the same question: where are you from? And when you say Colombia they ask: Are you Mexican? Or they ask if Colombia is in Mexico or if we speak Mexican. Being Colombian in Australia means answering awkward questions related to drugs or Pablo Escobar (Manuel).

Valentina made similar remarks:
When you say you are from Colombia and, more when you say that you are from Medellin everyone asks for cocaine or for Pablo Escobar. It’s just very annoying. I can’t even deal with that situation I always get angry because I think it’s ignorance. I mean they can just google Colombia (Valentina).
Other comments referred to values such as intolerance and corruption. For instance, Carmen noted: “Colombian society is very intolerant. We don’t appreciate what we have in Colombia, people love others just for a moment and after they destroy them”. Carolina had similar thoughts: “We are narrow-minded; we need to open to new things in order to take the next step”.

These excerpts show that acculturation and identity-making involves dialogues between both positive and negative representations of home culture. Participants value what they have to offer to Australia while also making sense of negative stereotypical representations of Colombia.

**Barriers to Settlement: Accents and Discrimination**

This theme captures some of the structural and symbolic factors that hamper the positive acculturation experience for migrants. These factors included language and accent, cultural practices such as how people greet one another, and institutional practices such as non-recognition of overseas qualifications. Despite the positive opportunities for personal and social development brought about by migration, almost all the participants reported obstacles in adjusting to the Australian context and experiences of a sense of alienation and isolation.

**Language, accents and borders.** Language mastery appeared as an important factor in a sense of belonging and, in the acculturation process for the Colombian migrants, English proficiency was the dominant issue. Interviewees described experiences of alienation or discomfort generated by limited or perceived low levels of spoken English proficiency in different areas of their life such as job hunting, social interactions or integration to the Australian community. Rafael communicated the complex significant personal, social and economic implications of limited English language proficiency:

> I think the most difficult part is the English ...you can’t communicate... one of the poverty indicators in a society is illiteracy. However, when we arrived in Australia, we couldn’t read, write, speak, listen ... consequently, we were more than an illiterate person, and that is very hard. This generates many social difficulties and limitations. Hence, we isolate ourselves.

Like Rafael, Antonio stressed that having limited English language competence can make one feel isolated and it can also produce difficulties in communication:

> At the beginning it was very difficult... I felt isolated ... I had many issues ... learning English and communicating effectively. There was a lot of frustration. Once I was hospitalised for an infection and there was nobody who speaks Spanish, that was the first year when I came here.

The experiences of not being able to communicate in English could result in situations that make people feel self-conscious or lead to embarrassing situations. Pilar recollected:

> My son remembers when we arrived, he didn’t know English at all. He always says to me “Do you think it’s easy to be at school and pee your pants?” because when he was 4 years old, he didn’t know how to ask for the toilet in English. He was very advanced, intelligent and articulated in Spanish, but he didn’t know how to speak English, it was so terrible that he still remembers that feeling of not being able to communicate.

Communicating in the host society’s language is extremely important to be able to meet migrants’ needs in everyday life as well as to establish a sense of identity and belonging. Susana relayed the significance of language in self-presentation and expression:

> It has been a slow process of finding myself in a language that is not mine. It took a lot of hard work, I can say that my level of English was good, but it was very academic... therefore finding my way, my personality in English has been a struggle, and there are still situations where I don’t feel confident, I still have difficulties being myself in a genuine way in English.

Some participants have moved from
being competent adults in Spanish language to being immigrants with some limited capacity to express their thoughts and feelings and to engage in social interactions in English with native English speakers. Some participants suggested an accent was a synonym for a lack of language proficiency and that this could result in discrimination.

Others have noted the role of language and accents in shaping interpersonal interaction between people from different ethnic groups. In a US-based study, Latinos reported often feeling monitored by white people when they speak English, and, if some sign of a distinctive accent is detected, they risk being mocked (Cobas & Feagin, 2008). In the United States language relegation of Latinos involves the assessment of English as superior to Spanish (Santa Ana, 2002) and takes place within a longer history of racialized power relations. Tomic (2013) refers to the process of discursively creating a distinction between the native Self and non-native Other as linguicism, which was evident in this study.

Cultural values: everyday experiences and “otherness”. Some participants’ experiences in Australia were expressed through different cultural values; in behaviour and patterns of interaction. The excerpts below illustrate differences in which participants felt that their cultural values influenced their lived experiences. Sara emphasised family closeness and expressions of physical affection and how these are seemingly at odds with “families in Australia”:

In Colombia, families are close-knit, and you realise it when you compare them with the families here. Families in Australia are very strange, we tend to have more physical contact. It doesn’t matter if you are 50 years old your mum still cuddles you, hugs you, even you take a nap with her ... Mums are always looking after you (Sara).

José also highlighted cultural differences in expressions of physical affection of physical affection and how this influences his sense of cultural identity:

We normally kiss each other’s cheeks when we say hello, when we introduce ourselves, or when we say goodbye. In Australia people become frightened with that, I think the physical contact, hugging, kissing is very Colombian, and I feel very Colombian in Australia when I do it, and more if I do it to my Australian or English friends (José).

Feeling “the other” in the new environment is associated with lack of familiarity (Furnham, 1990). In these excerpts this sense of otherness is related to differences in lived experiences that are evident when people compare themselves with the stereotypical Anglo Celtic Australian (Zevallos, 2003).

Labour market experiences. Participants described experiences concerning difficulties getting a job and the significance of it in their lives in Australia. Moreover, they found obtaining a job in their professions challenging, and more difficult at the professional level for which they have been trained in Colombia. Some of the participants have university degrees and some have also worked in their professions before arriving in Australia. An important barrier to obtaining a job are visa regulations: the participants for example who have a student visa can work 20 hours per week or 40 per fortnight and can therefore only apply for casual or part-time jobs.

Since I’m studying at the University the biggest difficulty has been to find an ideal job in something that I really want to do. I have been working here but in other areas. It’s tough, I have been looking for other jobs but there is a lot of competition and it is necessary to have a certain level of English, a certain level of social skills. I think finding a job it’s the hardest to achieve (Alberto).

The hardest part has been finding a job. It was a terrible shock because when I arrived my plan was to organise my resume and in four months get a job. However, I came across a different outcome. I study Engineering in Colombia and I hope to find a job I feel comfortable with... and that I can give the best of me (Carolina).
At the beginning, it was very hard for me working as a cleaner; I remember that I was working at the Crown casino with a friend, who is a Chemical Engineer, and the only way to stop us from going crazy was studying chemical formulas, to talk about something different than cloths or sponges... I didn’t spend all my life studying to work as a cleaner (Sara).

As part of the migration process and the migrant condition, individuals build relationships with a wide group of different social groups, and this promotes the development of a sense of identity and belonging. As Aizpurúa (2008) stated, immigrants from Latin America can have difficulties finding suitable jobs that match their labour experiences and educational background and/or economic opportunities and they are often underemployed. Participants associate the feeling of otherness, loss of status and experiences of discrimination with language proficiency, the difference in values and getting a job that meets their previous expectations.

Discussion
This research explored the experiences of migration, acculturation, barriers to settlement and the role of social and other structures in the settlement process for 15 Colombian immigrants in Melbourne, Australia. The findings show that participants in this study moved to Australia (between 1-11 years ago) primarily to further their studies, suggesting that this is a unique sample compared to previous waves of migrants from Latin American countries. Even though they chose to migrate, they still reported that there were strong economic and political drivers for leaving Colombia. Reasons for leaving Colombia were never singular, but instead related to the expectation that they will have a better future and opportunities in Australia combined with the home country’s history of violence and corruption. Similar to other investigations the main driver for migration for Colombians was therefore safety and economic stability (Madrigal, 2013; Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, & Hamsho-Diaz, 2010). In this study, safety and security were the main reasons to stay in Australia, mainly related to the physical safety experienced in Melbourne compared to Colombia.

The findings from this study are consistent with many other studies (e.g., Andreouli, 2013; Cicognani et al., 2018) that show that acculturation is a challenging process of reconstructing lives within the constraints and opportunities afforded by the receiving country as well as mobilising the social and cultural resources of the home country. In this study participants constructed their identity by negotiating their transnational identities while also situating themselves in terms of the discourses and practices in Australia that position them as migrants, newcomers and outsiders. Australia’s policies of multiculturalism facilitate cultural inclusion, but as participants indicated, they do not yet feel Australian. They are familiar with the physical and natural place, but there are various symbolic and structural barriers at different levels that influence their acculturation experiences and identity construction. The dynamism of acculturation is noted by Coronado (2014, p. 14): “we transform our identities and cultural practices, and simultaneously keep, to some degree, a sense of cultural control over what we adopt, change and transform”.

The findings showed that a strong sense of Colombian cultural identification is advantageous to the acculturation process. Participants expressed their connectedness to cultural and national identities which was central to their self-identification as Colombian. Many participants also identified stigma and stereotypes that consistently associate Colombians with drugs and violence, as factors that influence their identity negotiation in Australia. Hence, acculturation experiences vary according to the migrant’s pre- and post- contextual circumstances as well as the host society member’s attitudes towards immigrants as is evident in the findings of this study.

English language competence, job satisfaction and the acceptance from others were the main obstacles for Colombian migrants found in Australia. English
competence entails a process of becoming, learning and mastering the language. It implies mastering a set of norms and shared cultural conventions that have been constructed over time that is central to a sense of community and feeling settled. The feeling of lack of language competence can be a result of social and cultural exclusion, which can be a major barrier to a sense of belonging in Australia. Indeed, language is an expression of culture; it represents identity and cultural ties.

Participants also expressed learning language as a process of “finding yourself” in the new context of meaning. It is not just about being functional, but about making sense as part of that new context. This issue has been reported by many other communities for whom English is a second or third language. Not speaking English, a form of dominant cultural capital and proximity to whiteness, is a key site for understanding power relations. As noted by Colic-Peisker (2002), “English spoken with a particular accent becomes a social marker. A non-Australian accent is perceived as a symbol of otherness” (p. 152) as well as requiring reconstructions of identities to fit the confines of the English language.

Colombian migrants recognise that English competence is a key for academic, professional and social integration. One way that migrants respond to the experience of stigma is through internalisation, which “involves the devaluation and inferiorisation of oneself and one’s group and diminished self-esteem and self-efficacy” (Küey, 2015). It has been suggested that migrants support the idea that having an accent is inhibiting marking individuals as different (Deaux, 2000; Van Niele, 2014). Accents are associated with positive or negative attributes and they build interactions, perceptions and attitudes towards migrants. From the vantage point of migrant communities, accents and home language maintenance is also an act of survival, of self-protection against stereotypes and expression of identity vitality. Language and accents are powerful markers of identity. They are central in how ethnic groups go about making a home around memories of their country/cultures of origin and the broader histories of colonialism that privilege some languages and accents over others, in particular, English language which is also an index of white cultural capital (Sonn & Fisher, 1998).

The current research aimed to provide more insight into Colombian migrants’ experiences of acculturation and settlement. The importance of this exploratory study lies in the lack of information regarding the experiences of Colombian migrants in Melbourne, Australia through their own voices. Participants reported that migrating has been a challenging process of negotiating multiple identities and belongings after migration, while trying to maintain Colombian identity. The migration process of Colombian immigrants, like other migrant groups, is a dynamic process of acculturation between several structural and psychological forces (Bhatia, 2007); hence, this group should not be viewed as homogenous.

This study has some limitations. The study only reports the experiences of a voluntary group of immigrants from Colombia in Melbourne. Furthermore, the sample of this study does not include people from rural areas in Colombia. The next step in this research is to expand the sample to examine the different experiences of migration in a wider cross section which include city of origin, city of settlement, age, and gender and to identify the various community settings that fosters positive acculturation and opportunities for mutual transculturation. Doing so would give a better understanding of the diversity of Colombian people and the multitude of ways they negotiate displacement and acculturation.

This research has confirmed that migration experiences should be conceptualised as a process of meaning making through which migrants negotiate their identity and settlement. Stuart Hall (2000) has been central to this writing highlighting that identity-making: “is a matter of becoming rather than being. It is produced in and through narratives of both the past and present, a set of positions, within
broader arrangements of power through which people make sense of themselves and their communities” (p. 4). From a community psychology perspective, the focus is often on understanding the histories of those who migrate as well as the history of the receiving community and the context.

Growth in Australia’s immigrant population calls for a need to understand and recognise the unique challenges they face. A better understanding of the immigration experiences and factors that either promote or restrain the progress of immigrants is crucial to improving policies and programs that are more equitable and inclusive. As many have noted (e.g. Andreouli, 2013; Bhatia, 2002; Sonn & Lewis, 2009) acculturation is usefully conceptualised as a process of meaning making that involves migrants negotiate their identities and settlement through symbolic and cultural resources within the constraints and opportunities provided by the new environment.

References


Notes
1 Colombianidad: Is it the feeling, the nature and character of being Colombian.

2 Sombrero vueltiao: The Colombian vueltiao hat is one of the best known, cultural and popular symbols of Colombia.

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