



## Research paper

## Gender differences in drinking behavior among Latino/a heavy drinkers

Christina S. Lee<sup>a,\*</sup>, Felipe González Castro<sup>b</sup>, Mariana E. Nicholls<sup>a</sup>, Bridget O'Connor<sup>a</sup>, Sarah Marosi<sup>a</sup>, Suzanne M. Colby<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Applied Psychology, Bouvé College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA, 02115, USA

<sup>b</sup> College of Nursing and Health Innovation, Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Arizona State University, 550 N. 3rd Street, Phoenix, AZ, 85004, USA

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychiatry & Human Behavior, Center for Alcohol & Addiction Studies, Brown University School of Public Health, 121 South Main St., Providence, RI, 02912, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Latino/a  
Gender differences  
Acculturation  
Heavy drinking

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In the United States (U.S.), higher levels of acculturation have been associated with higher rates of heavy alcohol use more consistently among Latino women than among Latino men. This paper explores mechanisms underlying the link between acculturation and alcohol use among Latino/as in the U.S. We examine alcohol use expectancies and motives from the perspectives of the social cognitive theory of gender development.

**Methods:** Qualitative narratives data from six focus groups of individuals (total  $n = 37$ ), who met criteria for heavy drinking (4/5 drinks/occasion for females/males), were examined separately by gender (18 females; 19 males). Coded narratives data were analyzed using a framework that compared lives in Latin America and in the U.S. Emergent themes were analyzed for their consistency across genders. Gender-specific themes were identified.

**Results:** Changes in family structure and the loss of social networks prompted divergent patterns of drinking among men and women, such that relative to patterns in their countries of origin, drinking among Latino women increased while it decreased among Latino men. Men and women reported drinking to replace missing social bonds, a motive not frequently reported in the literature on drinking motives. Women who engaged in heavy-drinking nonetheless described traditional gender role expectations after U.S. arrival. Only men endorsed positive alcohol expectancies in Latin America. Women reported drinking to alleviate psychological distress in the U.S.

**Conclusions:** Pre and post-immigration comparisons revealed different drinking trajectories among men and women after immigration to the U.S. These patterns appeared to be influenced by new social contexts and changes in familial expectations regarding women's roles. Future inquiry that examines gender-specific themes in alcohol expectancies and motives unique to the experience of immigration, is warranted.

## Introduction

There is an increasing recognition that to understand changes in health behaviors among immigrants in the U.S., the occurrence of these behaviors prior to immigration, must be examined in comparison (Alegria, Sribney, Woo, Torres, & Guarnaccia, 2007; Sanchez, Rosa, Blackson, Sastre, & Rojas, 2014). Thus acculturation, as a dynamic and constantly changing process of cultural change, is best conceptualized as a developmental trajectory, not as a trait that occurs at a single point in time (Castro, 2007; Castro, Marsiglia, Kulis, & Kellison, 2010; Lopez-Class, Castro, & Ramirez, 2011).

Traditional cultural gender-based expectations regarding appropriate alcohol use operate as potent determinants of drinking behavior among Latino/as (Castro & Coe, 2007). Moreover, within Latin American cultures, the culturally-specific gender role of *marianismo* prescribes the idealized role of women as mothers and family caretakers (Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010; Gil & Vasquez, 1996). These *marianismo* cultural norms, as observed within many traditional Latino families and communities, regard alcohol use among women as inappropriate and thus forbidden among Latino women (Abraído-Lanza, Armbrister, Florez, & Aguirre, 2006; Castro, Marsiglia et al., 2010; Kulis, Marsiglia, & Nagoshi, 2012). Despite these traditional norms that

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Applied Psychology, Bouvé College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA, 02115, USA.

E-mail address: [chr.lee@northeastern.edu](mailto:chr.lee@northeastern.edu) (C.S. Lee).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.12.003>

prohibit or disapprove of alcohol use among Latino women, there also exists heterogeneity in social and gender norms regarding alcohol use among various Latino subgroups. For example, abstinence, and particularly low rates of alcohol use, are often noted among Mexican American women, albeit mostly among those who espouse traditional values. Nonetheless and overall, significant gender differences persist, as revealed in a large survey of Mexican women in three cities in Mexico. This survey found higher rates of lifetime abstinence from alcohol among Mexican women (66%), as compared with Mexican men (23%) (Slone et al., 2006).

A cultural norms hypothesis about abstinence from alcohol use among Latino immigrant women, postulates that low rates of alcohol use in their native country is the result of restrictive gender norms against alcohol use. As restrictive norms are less prevalent in the U.S., during the process of acculturation, Latino women are able to adopt the drinking patterns of the American majority culture (Kulis et al., 2012). Thus, following immigration to the U.S., these acculturation-related changes in alcohol use have been more pronounced, though heterogeneous, among Latino women as compared with Latino men.

A cross-sectional analysis of the 1995 National Alcohol Survey ( $n = 825$  women, 761 men) revealed that Latino women, when in the U.S., were more likely to increase their drinking than Latino men. Further, Latinas drank more often than White women, and became drunk more often (Zemore, 2005). Drinking changes appear to persist throughout the process of acculturation (Collins & McNair, 2002). Findings from the NESARC (National Epidemiologic Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions) showed a higher frequency of alcohol consumption among more highly acculturated (i.e., English-speaking) Latino women, as compared with Latino men (Cook & Caetano, 2014). Relatedly, Latinas who immigrate to the U.S. when they are older ( $> 12$  years) have lower rates of heavy drinking in the U.S., as compared with Latinas who arrive at a younger age (Alegría et al., 2007). The mechanisms that influence alcohol consumption associated with the process of acculturation need to be explored in greater depth, to better inform public health interventions (Abraído-Lanza et al., 2006; Castro, 2007; Zemore, 2005).

The social cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) posits that people experience social consequences from their behaviors. For example, if a behavior such as heavy drinking is incongruent with cultural or gender-based norms for women, then a woman's heavy drinking can generate disapproval and judgments from family, peers, and perhaps also from the local community. Over the course of development, a person may adopt such cultural norms as personal standards that guide their own attitudes towards alcohol use, and their corresponding behavior. That is, these norms can become internalized, operating as self-regulatory influences.

By contrast, traditional gender role expectations do not prohibit drinking among Latino men, and may even encourage it. Within some peer groups, role expectations for men encourage alcohol use, particularly as a form of social bonding and comradery with male peers. According to the social cognitive theory of gender development, heavy drinking, typically regarded as a “male behavior,” is a socially approved activity within many male-oriented peer groups. Similarly, among certain groups, alcohol use by Latino men is often acceptable and expected (Kulis et al., 2012). The negative form of *machismo*, as contrasted with the positive form, *caballerismo*, allows the expression of male behaviors that can include aggression, and heavy drinking as typical and revered forms of “masculine” behavior (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008; Unger, Shakib, Gallaher, & Ritt-Olson, 2006). In this regard, rates of alcohol consumption among Latino males pre-immigration, e.g., prevalence of heavy drinking in a community or the frequency (days) of heavy drinking per month, tend to remain the same after their immigration to the U.S. (Sanchez, et al., 2014).

To obtain a greater depth of understanding of these acculturative effects on alcohol use, in the present study we asked Latino/a heavy drinkers to describe their lives in their countries of origin, and resultant

changes following immigration to the U.S. We also asked about how they perceived these changes as influences on their alcohol consumption behavior. Few, if any, qualitative studies, have explored these changing social contexts, social norms, cultural influences, and the effects of these changes, on alcohol use behaviors (Brown, Goldman, Inn, & Anderson, 1980). We propose that these perceived sociocultural changes may reveal underlying mechanisms that exert important effects on drinking behaviors. Thus, the goals of this study were to explore how Latino men and women describe their family structures, gender role expectations, and the influences of social norms on their alcohol use and reasons for drinking, as these occurred within their countries of origin, and then within the U.S. This includes exploring the extent to which they perceive these factors as influences that have changed their drinking behaviors.

## Method

Grounded theory, the approach of examining theoretical constructs that are derived from the qualitative analysis of the data, was used as the guiding methodology for the current study and its data analytic approaches (Corbin, Strauss, & Strauss, 2014). An inductive process was used to ascribe meaning to observations emerging from the data. These data were obtained from six focus groups of Latino/as who migrated to the U.S. from different Latin American countries. Focus groups were separated by gender, to increase the focus on the topics in a gender-specific way, and to minimize the possibility that discussion would be influenced by the presence of persons of the opposite gender.

### Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited from the local community using flyers, advertisements in a Spanish-language newspaper, and broadcasted on local Spanish-language radio stations. Study-eligible participants were those who were: (a) between the ages of 18–65 (b) proficient in spoken English, and (c) a frequent heavy drinker ( $\geq 5/4$  per occasion for male/females respectively, more than once a week) (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism, 2005). To assess drinking status, participants were asked: (a) “In the past 12 months, how often have you had some kind of drink containing alcohol?” and (b) “On days that you drank, how many drinks did you usually have?” (Zayas, Rojas, & Malgady, 1998). Participants were informed that a bilingual interpreter would be present at the focus groups. Thirty-seven (73%) of the fifty-one eligible individuals participated in this study.

### Focus groups

The six focus groups were conducted separately by gender (3 male groups with a total 19 participants, and 3 female groups with a total of 18 participants,  $n = 37$  participants total). Consistent with the grounded theory approach (Corbin, et al., 2014) the focus group guide posed a few key questions to encourage participation: (a) description of their lives in their countries of origin vs. the U.S., (b) changes in their drinking behavior after U.S. arrival, and (c) reasons or influences on drinking behavior (country of origin vs. U.S.). All focus groups, conducted by the first author and a bilingual research assistant, started with a “study induction phase” in which participants were welcomed to the focus group and refreshments were provided. This important part of the process developed trust and rapport and has been used in other focus group studies as a culturally congruent approach (Moreno, 2007). The bilingual research assistant described the study, including risks/benefits, and voluntary nature of participation. Participants were invited to ask questions about the project, to further increase comfort (Moreno, 2007).

Each participant completed an informed consent form and brief questionnaires assessing demographics. They were also asked to create name aliases for themselves and place the placard in front of them for

others to use their alias in the focus group. This was done to promote anonymity and confidentiality. Congruent with the custom of conveying information through narratives (Madriz, 1998), participants were asked to introduce themselves by responding to opening questions about how people immigrated to the U.S. If a participant needed to speak in Spanish, the bilingual group moderator conducted that part of the session; these portions of the group were transcribed in Spanish and translated to English for coding. Each focus group lasted approximately 2 h. The participants were compensated \$30.00 in gift cards for their participation.

#### Data coding and analytic procedures

The focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed in English and in Spanish (with sections translated from Spanish to English as needed). Following the procedure to develop and then refine codebooks for qualitative analysis, a code book was developed by the original analytic team (C.L. and S.C.) after all focus groups were conducted (Mermelstein & Group, 1999). The codebook was further elaborated on and refined for the current study aims, resulting in the final version used for the current analyses. As the three independent coders (one bilingual Spanish) reviewed the transcripts, they identified new codes, which were introduced inductively. The research team (all co-authors) met to share memos detailing their thoughts in coding the data (Corbin, et al., 2014), whether a code needed to be clarified or deleted, and coding discrepancies. Roundtable discussions were convened to check the ongoing content of text narratives analyses. For example, one roundtable distinguished between drinking to alleviate general low mood versus drinking specifically to alleviate loneliness that accompanied immigration.

To extract themes, the research team reviewed codes in response to the focus group questions. The team discussed and compared codes, and their repetition within and across groups. If the codes shared an underlying similar idea, a theme was generated. For example, the codes “drinking to have fun” or “drinking to relieve low mood”; were organized under the theme “Alcohol motives”. Criteria were instituted to determine whether themes were cross-cutting (for all genders). Cross-cutting themes were determined to be important if they were discussed by at least one group for each gender. Themes were operationally defined as “gender-specific,” if the theme was mentioned by at least two of the three groups of one gender, and not by any groups of the other gender” (see Table 1). This approach is consistent with the definition of “theme consistency”, i.e., as expressed by one or more of participants across gender-defined focus groups (Luke et al., 2001).

To further facilitate this interpretation such themes, the emotional content of quotes were noted within our text reporting itself, as well as

the context (i.e., who was speaking) (Castro & Coe, 2007). This information increases our understanding of the speaker’s narrative and highlights the relative importance of what participants shared.

## Results

There were 37 participants, ranging from 23 to 56 years of age. The mean age of the women in the three female focus groups ( $n = 18$ ) was 36 years, and for the men in the male focus groups ( $n = 19$ ) was 42 years. Approximately one-quarter came from the Caribbean (12% Puerto Rican, 12% Dominican), 39% were from Colombia, and remaining participants from Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Bolivia, and Guatemala. The three female groups scored as more highly acculturated than the male groups (Marin & Gamba, 1996).

### Theme 1: Changes in family structure after U.S. Immigration

Men and women associated immigration to the U.S. with changes in their family roles and social structures, which included changes in traditional gendered familial relationships, or expectations for one’s role in the family based on gender. Men, more often than women (2 male groups, 1 female group), discussed that they were no longer the sole providers in the U.S., as women also worked outside the home. Women also discussed their roles in the U.S., as providers of family income. Men (in all three groups), also talked about how leaving their families behind in their countries of origin to work in the U.S., irrevocably disrupted their family structure. Both men and women felt that these changes eroded the quality and closeness of their family relationships:

“...Back in my country I think we are more close with our own families, our own friends. Usually we get together all the time. When I came here to America, no more, because it was like at the beginning I was rushing, rushing, rushing. (Salome).”

“I think that 90% of the people that get separated to come to America ended up in divorce. And that is one of the biggest differences of coming to America, you still support your family, but your kids grow up without a father, without the family, because the family is broken already.” (Ramón)

Another important consequence of women working outside the home in the US, was that there was no one at home to help their children succeed in school, as was the practice in Latin America. In the U.S., with both parents working, children require reliable supervision and quality child care, but this is not guaranteed when parents work in unstable or low-paying jobs. Women suggested that children were at

**Table 1**  
Major Themes.

| Focus Group #   | Females |       |       | Males |       |                  |
|---|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------------------|
|   | #1      | #2    | #3    | #1    | #2    | #3               |
| Number of Participants  | n = 6   | n = 4 | n = 8 | n = 3 | n = 8 | n = 8            |
| Theme 1. Changes in Family Structure after U.S. immigration           | 0/6     | 3/4   | 0/8   | 0/3   | 1/8   | 3/8              |
| Women work outside the home   |         |       |       |       |       |                  |
| Theme 2. Changes in family structure influence drinking behavior      | 6/6     | 4/4   | 0/8   | 1/3   | 1/8   | 3/8              |
| Theme 3. Gender Role expectations influence social norms for drinking |         |       |       |       |       |                  |
| Men can drink, women can't  | 6/6     | 4/4   | 0/8   | 0/3   | 0/8   | 0/8 <sup>a</sup> |
| Childcare responsibilities preclude drinking                          | 6/6     | 3/4   | 2/8   | 0/3   | 1/8   | 0/8              |
| Drinking in front of parents disrespectful                            | 3/6     | 2/4   | 0/8   | 0/3   | 0/8   | 2/8              |
| Theme 4. Gender differences in drinking motives                       |         |       |       |       |       |                  |
| Drinking for pleasure -US   | 4/6     | 3/4   | 3/8   | 2/3   | 4/8   | 4/8              |
| Drinking for pleasure - Latin America                                 | 0/6     | 0/4   | 0/8   | 3/3   | 4/8   | 3/8 <sup>a</sup> |
| Alleviate loneliness  | 3/6     | 2/4   | 4/8   | 1/3   | 4/8   | 2/8              |
| Alleviate feelings of distress (anxiety, depression)                  | 2/6     | 3/4   | 4/8   | 0/3   | 5/8   | 0/8              |

N.B. Cross-cutting gender themes were considered important if they were discussed by at least one group of each gender.

<sup>a</sup> Gender specific theme = if at least 2 groups of one gender discussed the theme and it was not discussed by any groups of the other gender.

risk for school drop-out in the U.S., because the mothers were not at home: “But when they (Latino/as) come here (United States) it is different, it’s like what she said, when you come...you have to rent, so yeah, two people [within a household, the two partners] have to work. So the children, they start going to school (in the U.S.) but when they see that things get tough, they leave school.”

### *Theme 2: Changes in family structure influences drinking behavior*

Nearly all participants (2 female, 3 male groups) attributed changes in their drinking behavior in the U.S. to changes in their family and social structures (i.e., separation from loved ones, loss of social ties, working outside the home). When asked, “What factors in the U.S. motivate you to drink?” one female group unanimously replied: “The Change”. [Investigator comment: participants clarified that “change” referred to feeling uncertain about what to expect in a new country, the emphasis on work, losing important social ties]. The erosion of valued social ties and economic pressures generated feelings of social isolation and alienation. Alcohol consumption was viewed as an alternative to boredom and social isolation. When asked, “How does your drinking compare in your native country to here in the U.S.?” participants responded:

“We need to survive by yourself, nobody is going to help you, you need to be everything by yourself.” “A lot of people are lonely [in the U.S.], so they go to the bars only to see people [in the U.S.]. So, they can feel good around other people. So that is one of the reasons, because we are here alone.” (Patty).

“Here [in the U.S.] I don’t have any friends...there is a long period of being locked up inside, which there wasn’t in my country. You don’t know what to do here. Here without a reason you feel thirsty, or you don’t find what to do and you grab a beer and drink it” (Dulce)

In this quote, a woman describes how increased mobility and a sense of independence (i.e., away from familial influences), influenced changes in behavior: “Let’s say that because I had freedom, because my mother wasn’t home, I had my own apartment, I had my own car, I was going to school, so I made up my own rules.” (Mary). Dulce reported that while she used to “drink sporadically, one to three times a month (in Latin America),” here, in the U.S., she is drinking every week. The relative absence of constraining familial expectations in a new cultural context, may prompt increased alcohol consumption among women. Men, when they immigrated alone and ahead of their families, consumed alcohol more in the U.S., but this pattern subsided with U.S. residency. Taken together, these quotes associate the changes in family structure, expectations, and relationships, with shifts in drinking behavior among Latino/as.

### *Theme 3: Gender role expectations influence social norms for drinking*

After U.S. immigration, only women (2 female, 0 male groups, a gender-specific theme) described traditional gender role expectations, i.e., that expectations for one’s role in the family as a wife and mother, constrain alcohol consumption. When asked, “When does drinking begin to look bad for women in your cultures or community (in the U.S.)?” one female group unanimously agreed:

“Because sometimes the society views women vs. men, and they think, oh, you’re a woman and you have children, and you are drinking...So maybe in the family the father and the mother drinks and the people see the woman as worse than the father. Because it is normal that men can drink and [women cannot] (Maria).” [Investigator clarification: “Have different standards”]. The group replied, together: “yeah”.

“In the ‘Spanish culture,’ how can I explain...Es como decir que la mujer se ve peor que el hombre [cuando toma alcohol] en la cultura de nosotros (it’s like saying that the woman looks worse than the

man [when drinking alcohol] in our culture” (Tatiana). Wanda clarified: “Yeah, in our culture, when a woman drinks, she is a whore. When a man drinks, he is a man. That is the way it is.”

Moreover, some women described how their own mothers fit within proscribed traditional expectations for women:

“My mother doesn’t drink. To this day she doesn’t...You know the mother has a very strong influence on how that child is going to be in the future...because of my mother’s influence and the way that she has raised me, I’ve had the experience where yeah, I’ve gone out and I can drink...but I always come back to what my mother said. She would say in Spanish, “tu nunca me has visto a mi coger una cerveza en la mano”, that is the truth, she said, “you’ve never seen me with a beer in my hand”, and that is the truth.

One woman commented, “I come back to the way she (mother) raised us. I hear myself saying the same things to my daughter that my mother said to me, that I said I never would (Mary).”

Women also equated being a responsible caregiver, with not drinking while caring for children (3 female, 1 male group). In one group, women unanimously agreed that, “it looks bad when the women, the mother [is the one] who drinks”, especially when she can’t take care of her children. When asked, “How would you compare your drinking in your country of origin to here in the U.S.,” Maria answered, “I just drink when I have somebody to take care of children who’s not drinking. Like my husband, right now he doesn’t drink so I can drink because he can take care of the kids.”

In conveying traditional family norms and expectations, women and men, talked about not drinking in front of their elders to show respect, even as adults in the U.S. (2 female, 1 male group). When asked, “When you drink, how do you drink?” Johanna replied, “If my father is in front of me, I can’t drink (group laughter). Eve explained [to the investigator]: “...because we respect our parents. My father is coming next weekend. He drinks now, and I still show respect, that I have for him, so I won’t drink in front of him”. In contrast, men refrained from drinking when younger and in their countries of origin:

“I started drinking here (in the U.S.), but I started when I was 19 and I was still living with my parents and it was kind of embarrassing for me to drink and have my father, my parents, look at me drinking... My parents were very strict, and I didn’t want to make them disappointed”. (Diego)

“When I was in Mexico (17 years old), I don’t drink anything in front of my father, nothing...I have a lot of respect to my parents.” (Angel)

### *Theme 4: Gender differences in drinking motives*

The motivational model of alcohol use posits that people drink alcohol as a way to regulate their positive and negative emotions, so are motivated to drink for different reasons (Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995). People drink alcohol to avoid negative emotions like sadness (“coping motives”), or to increase positive affective states or an enjoyable emotional experience (“enhancement motives”) (Cooper et al., 1995). Men and women (3 female, 3 male groups) reported drinking for pleasure, or enhancement motives, in the U.S.. In one male group, the laughter emphasizes agreement:

“Always party, everywhere you go there is always party. You go somewhere and they start with a bottle of beer and then a bottle of ‘aguardiente,’ and that is it! (laughter)” (Mario).

Rolando described, “in [country of origin], after work I would get together with friends to drink beer. And on the weekends, starting on Friday night...I would go to a private club and dance and drink (laughter).”

In contrast, while men discussed drinking for pleasure in Latin America, none of the female groups did (3 male, 0 female groups, a gender specific theme). This finding is consistent with the notion that behaviors that are not socially sanctioned, (i.e., female drinking in a traditional society), would elicit disapproval, thus discouraging that behavior. Women reported drinking for pleasure only in the United States. Moreover, some women described learning to drink heavily and for fun, in the U.S., while in college:

“I say it (drinking) became a problem when I went to college here (U.S.). I hate to say it but white kids showed me how to drink. Like I would go to a bar and have a beer because this is something that I’m accustomed to. So they (college students) would tell me to get something different, ‘Vodka’? I said okay, ‘let me try that’. So this girl showed me how to drink. Oh my goodness...Vodka, screw-drivers, waking up in the cemetery, okay, there’s a problem. These people showed me how to drink” (laughter)” (Mary). Wanda said, “They [college students] drink like they are thirsty, like they are starving.”

After U.S. immigration, variations in drinking patterns emerged among men and women, partially attributable to different motives for drinking among men and women. Both men and women reported drinking to cope with loneliness and boredom (3 female, 3 male groups). Among men who immigrated alone, one pattern was to increase alcohol consumption temporarily, for up to a few years immediately after US arrival. Men reported that they drank more during this transitory time to mitigate feelings of loneliness and of being overwhelmed. The “separation of leaving the family behind” motivated alcohol consumption:

“When I arrived (in the U.S.), like my friend here said, I began drinking because of loneliness” (Aureliano).

“Here (in the U.S.), I started to drink. I felt alone and nostalgic. I had a friend and like me he had been here for a year, he was the one that said, come on let’s drink a beer, so you forget your sorrows” (Angel).

“When I first arrived in the U.S. (age 18), I drank more because I was alone, and because I was not with my family” (Robert).

During this period, men struggled with the language barrier, did not know what to do, and lacked opportunities and locations to socialize.

“And the other reason was lack of communicating, the language barrier. I used to be so embarrassed to go to the store, any store...I mean, the lack of communicating to the world, because you don’t know, you don’t know how to live in the U.S. I was afraid to face life (Milton).”

Further, unlike the women, men reported drinking heavily in their countries of origin, and some experienced negative consequences there. As one male participant described:

“But the custom over there [Latin America] is the older you are, the more, like anything else, the more alcoholic you become.” (Milton)

In the U.S., some men felt they had a fresh start and were able to achieve gains (e.g., better jobs), that they wanted to maintain, thereby avoiding excessive alcohol use that could compromise these accomplishments. When asked, “Is there something about the U.S. in particular, that you don’t find in your native country, that makes you stop using substances here?” men agreed with: “wanting to improve” (Rolando). In general, the pattern of drinking among Latino men after U.S. arrival, was to decrease their alcohol consumption.

“Here (in the U.S.), I drink a lot less, every weekend. I were in [country of origin], I’d be drinking every day (laughter). Sure, here you have to get up at 5 in the morning to go to work, I’m not going to work drunk...So actually, I drink more with responsibility here (U.S.)” (Mario)

“Here I have changed a lot, I have stopped drinking...Now I don’t drink, I go to the gym, I have two jobs, I have a son...I have my home and I am responsible to work”. (Angel)

All of the male groups, and none of the female groups, cited work responsibilities as the reason they drank less, or abstained altogether, in the U.S.

“... here one becomes more responsible, here you can’t stop paying the rent, the bills you cannot stop paying. In Colombia, you don’t pay rent, it doesn’t matter. So here you have to be more responsible, you think more about the money. In Colombia, you have more money for rent, you drink it, you don’t pay the rent.” (Abelardo)

In contrast, all the female groups, and one of the male groups, talked about consuming alcohol because they expected it would help alleviate their dysphoric mood (i.e., depression or anxiety). When asked, “What are your reasons for drinking in the United States?” Dulce replied, “I am 52 years old, and never in my country I drank a beer because I was tired or I could not sleep. Here (U.S.) I do it”. In here (U.S.), we drink because we feel too much stress. Too much depress, sometime (Claudia). Dulce volunteered, “to miss/desire what you leave behind in your country, many people from our countries become melancholics.” To this, Sandra volunteered, “and you drink one beer and another one...” The interviewer then asked about the connection that participants made between melancholy and drinking, and Dulce replied, “Melancholy, as I understand it, is when you miss someone or many people you left behind in your country.” Sandra further explained, “I think that you are sad and you start drinking and start feeling a little better, to me that is the connection. When you try to feel better”. Finally, Luz stated that drinking helps people to alleviate the sadness, by enabling people to cry: “Some people get better relaxed (after drinking), when you sober, you don’t feel like you can cry because you miss your friends or your family. But if you have two beers, I know some people who drink two beers crying and crying and you can’t make them stop (laughter).”

## Discussion

Our study examines Latino/a alcohol consumption behaviors before and after immigration to the U.S. Changes in family roles and structures, including gendered family relationships, gender role expectations, social and cultural norms for drinking, drinking expectancies, and motives underlying acculturative changes, were associated with divergent drinking patterns among immigrant Latino men and Latino women. Our finding, that women in our study reported increases in their drinking behavior after U.S. immigration, is consistent with national level surveys, and contributes to this quantitative evidence by providing qualitative evidence for the underlying reasons for these observed increases in drinking behavior among women. Two gender-specific themes (i.e., exclusive to male or to female groups) were identified: 1) only women mentioned and discussed the persistent influence of traditional gender role expectations even after immigrating to the U.S., and 2) only men described drinking for pleasure in Latin America.

Investigating underlying mediators and mechanisms can inform how acculturation differentially shapes health risk behaviors like heavy drinking (Lopez-Class et al., 2011). A potential underlying mechanism through which increased acculturation leads to increased drinking, applicable to immigrant women from various Latin American countries, is the exposure to new environments that have more permissive norms towards alcohol use among women, as well as more social opportunities for alcohol use (Crockett et al., 2007). Some women in our study, in referring to their younger years, said that their alcohol use was at its peak when they were in college in the U.S., a novel social environment, learning how to drink from non-Latino college attending women, thus adopting the drinking norms of non-Latino college-attending women their age (Caetano, 1987; Collins & McNair, 2002).

Changes in drinking in the U.S. might be attributed to differing social norms across cultures/countries (i.e., the absence of constraining familial expectations regarding women's drinking and women's roles), and is another potential mechanism through which increased acculturation might have prompted increased alcohol consumption (Mills & Caetano, 2012; Zemore, 2005). For these Latino women, culturally different social norms for drinking in the college environment and beyond appeared to facilitate alcohol consumption (Mills & Caetano, 2012; Zemore, 2005). Among Latino women, the restrictive effects of traditional gender socialization against excessive drinking may diminish through acculturation, via these women's adoption of more permissive alcohol use norms (Kulis et al., 2012; Wilsnack, Wilsnack, Gmel, & Kantor, 2016). A changing social context that involves a greater acceptance and adoption of individualist values in the U.S., may weaken collectivist values, thus diminishing concerns that one's substance use may alienate family and friends (Kulis et al., 2012). Also, social networks in the U.S. are larger and more diffuse, thus making any socially non-conforming behavior, less obvious (Castro, Marsiglia et al., 2010).

Interestingly, despite drinking heavily in the U.S., some of the female participants described the traditional gender roles for women that constrained women's drinking, whereas men did not mention this at all. Some female participants described, with evident affection, their mothers in their home countries who followed traditional gender roles that included not drinking alcohol, even as they themselves did not adhere to the same cultural norms in the U.S. In contrast, studies of non-hazardous drinking Latina women in the U.S., suggest that these traditional expectations continue to influence drinking behavior (Raffaelli et al., 2007). One web-based survey of Caucasian and Mexican American college bound students ( $n = 2241$ ), revealed that Mexican American females were less likely to hold permissive values toward alcohol use than their Caucasian counterparts; these attitudes also predicted less personal use of alcohol. In contrast, family influences did not influence drinking behavior among Caucasians. The authors hypothesized that Latinas internalized family-based perceived norms that discouraged the use of alcohol (Corbin, Vaughan, & Fromme, 2008). The relationship between conflicting messages regarding gender role expectations and drinking behavior could be important to understand when designing interventions to improve health and reduce risk behaviors.

Last, this study revealed gender differences in motives for alcohol use. Men, not women, talked about drinking for positive social reasons (i.e., to feel good when partying/with friends), in both countries, including Latin America. In contrast, women only talked about drinking to have fun when in the U.S. The social cognitive theory of gender socialization (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) would predict that in countries where female drinking is not socially sanctioned, there would be lower rates of alcohol consumption. Thus, one interpretation might be that these women were aware of greater constraints against drinking for women in Latin America (Kulis et al., 2012), so did not associate drinking for pleasure or fun there. To provide further context to our findings, it is important to recognize the cultural strata that exist within each of the many Latin American countries, including Mexico. Traditional and indigenous Latino women who live in rural areas of a country might be more likely to observe traditional gender roles involving alcohol use. By contrast, Latino women who live in large metropolitan communities, and who travel outside of their country, may not observe these traditional norms to the same extent, or not at all.

Our study findings revealed that women consumed alcohol to reduce psychological distress (Cooper et al., 1995). It has been hypothesized that drinking may be a form of "self-medication" to cope with stressors arising from hardships (Colder, 2001; Kulis et al., 2012). Negative emotions are related to self-reported stress and can prompt coping behaviors such as alcohol use, to manage or minimize the occurrence of negative emotions (Cooper et al., 1995). Women in the study explicitly stated that they expected a certain effect from drinking,

(i.e., to alleviate stress by helping them to cry), while men did not make that explicit connection.

Participants of both genders reported drinking specifically to alleviate loneliness and nostalgia about their homeland, i.e., under a "melancholic" mood. This has not been reported in prior research with non-immigrant samples measuring alcohol motives (e.g., Cooper et al., 1995; Martins, Bartholow, Cooper, Von Gunten, & Wood, 2018). However, in describing their loneliness and drinking to recreate memories of past experiences and loved ones (i.e., nostalgia), and to replace lost social connections, few talked about the presence of feeling anxious or stressed at the time. Instead, they were drinking to replace a feeling or person that was missed. Addiction has been described in part as a "bonding disorder" in which people may use substances to replace a missed bond (Hari, 2015). Thus, it may be that there is an alcohol motive uniquely related to the experience of immigration, i.e., leaving an old country and adapting to a new one.

Clearly, cultural experiences and related cultural beliefs shape expectancies about the effects of alcohol consumption (Drainoni et al., 2014) and influence motives for drinking (Cooper et al., 1995). Alcohol expectancies which are expressed by family or peers, constitute distal factors that can influence more proximal influences, including personal beliefs about the effects of alcohol use (Brown et al., 1980), which in turn can influence motives for alcohol use, and then actual alcohol use behaviors (Hasking, Lyvers, & Carpio, 2011). This analysis suggests that immigration to a new environment introduces novel experiences that can shape alcohol expectancies and motives in unique ways. In a review of studies on culture and alcohol use, historical studies have shown how heavier alcohol consumption has been associated with the stress of acculturative changes (Castro, Barrera, Mena, & Aguirre, 2014). Our findings suggest the need to further explore alcohol expectancies and motives among immigrants, and specifically their anticipated consequences on drinking to relieve feelings of boredom, loneliness, missing valued social connections, or attempts to re-create the social experiences they enjoyed, in their countries of origin.

### Limitations

This study focused on heavy drinkers and as such, the sample was not representative of all Latino men and women who migrate to the U.S.. Relatedly, this study sample included individuals who could speak English as well as Spanish, so the study sample may be limited in its range of acculturation. A Spanish-speaking focus group moderator was always present to conduct the group in Spanish for persons who might feel more comfortable speaking Spanish. Nevertheless, our study findings point to the need for more studies of individuals of all acculturation and socioeconomic levels, to examine varying trajectories of acculturative change (Castro, Marsiglia et al., 2010; Cook & Caetano, 2014).

Some aspects of the study design presented limitations. Although at least 6 participants were scheduled for each focus group, fewer than anticipated showed up in a few cases. This is a limitation because a smaller-than average focus group influences the tone and content of discussions. For example, group consensus may be more likely to build if the group was smaller. Second, due to study design decisions we are only able to present age at the aggregate level, thus are unable to offer any further interpretations as to how age influenced reporting. The differences noted due to gender, might also reflect differences due to age. For example, it is possible that if men were in college while in the U.S., they would have described drinking alcohol in greater amounts or more frequently. Our qualitative data suggests that men worked and did not attend school, corroborating the narrative they shared with us, that they came to the U.S. to make a better living and to ultimately afford to migrate members of their family. That said, because we did not ask for their specific ages at the time of their accounts, we cannot offer any further interpretation of how their age impacted their experiences at the time. Moreover, stories about alcohol use will vary by the age and

life experience of the individual telling them. For example, college students will have different drinking contexts than elders. A future focus group study with a larger number of participants, might organize groups by homogenous age cohorts to explore meaningful difference across developmental stages and as a function of immigration, and age at immigration, for both men and for women.

## Conclusions

Qualitative research can add depth of analysis to enrich current quantitative findings and identify new research directions (Wagner et al., 2012). In this study of Latino heavy drinkers, the loss of valued social ties and changing social contexts influenced different trajectories of alcohol use behaviors. For women, access to more opportunities and liberal drinking environments, may have led to an increase in heavy drinking following immigration. College attendance, in particular, introduced new social norms for drinking. Some women recalled gendered norms and expectations regarding alcohol use in their countries of origin. Heavy drinking might attract social disapproval for women within a traditional context, whereas being in a new culture in which such restrictions are absent, may promote increased alcohol consumption in women. Participants of both genders felt that drinking alcohol would alleviate loneliness and replace missed social bonds. Our qualitative approach yielded new findings about how immigration changes alcohol use expectancies, which in turn can increase alcohol use. Our study findings provide early evidence for how preventative and treatment interventions can be tailored for Latino men and women. Both genders would benefit from an intervention that reduces the stressors (Cooper et al., 1995) involved in the process of adaptation to a new country. Women in particular might benefit from a strategy that teaches ways to cope with negative affect in ways that do not involve the use of substances. Future research could inform a larger study by using a mixed methods approach that builds on the ideas presented here, in combination with quantitative methods, as a means to formally assess trajectories of change in drinking behavior among Latino men and women (Castro, Kellison, Boyd, & Kopak, 2010; Castro, Marsiglia et al., 2010).

## Acknowledgements

Portions of this paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August 2018. This study was funded by an unrestricted grant from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. The terms of the awards assure that the sponsors had no post-award scientific input or other influence with respect to the study's design, analysis, interpretation, or preparation of the article. We wish to thank the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) for their support of R01AA021136, and K23AA14905, awarded to the first author. NIAAA had no involvement in determining study design, data collection, analysis, data interpretation, writing of this report, or the decision to submit the article for publication. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions made by Karlin Feldman-Nazario, M.D., in the preparation of this manuscript.

## References

- Abraído-Lanza, A. F., Armbrister, A. N., Florez, K. R., & Aguirre, A. N. (2006). Toward a theory-driven model of acculturation in public health research. *American Journal of Public Health, 96*(8), 1342–1346 doi:AJP.2005.064980 [pii]10.2105/AJPH.2005.064980.
- Alegría, M., Sribney, W., Woo, M., Torres, M., & Guarnaccia, P. (2007). Looking beyond nativity: The relation of age of immigration, length of residence, and birth cohorts to the risk of onset of psychiatric disorders for Latinos. *Research in Human Development, 4*(1–2), 19–47.
- Arciniega, G. M., Anderson, T. C., Tovar-Blank, Z. G., & Tracey, T. J. (2008). Toward a fuller conception of machismo: Development of a traditional machismo and caballero scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 55*(1), 19.
- Brown, S. A., Goldman, M. S., Inn, A., & Anderson, L. R. (1980). Expectations of reinforcement from alcohol: Their domain and relation to drinking patterns. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 48*(4), 419.
- Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychological Review, 106*(4), 676.
- Caetano, R. (1987). Acculturation and drinking patterns among US Hispanics. *Addiction, 82*(7), 789–799.
- Castillo, L. G., Perez, F. V., Castillo, R., & Ghosheh, M. R. (2010). Construction and initial validation of the marianismo beliefs scale. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly, 23*(2), 163–175.
- Castro, F. G. (2007). Is acculturation really detrimental to health? *American Public Health Association*.
- Castro, F. G., & Coe, K. (2007). Traditions and alcohol use: A mixed-methods analysis. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 13*(4), 269.
- Castro, F. G., Barrera, M., Jr, Mena, L. A., & Aguirre, K. M. (2014). Culture and alcohol use: Historical and sociocultural themes from 75 years of alcohol research. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, (Supplement(s17))*, 36–49.
- Castro, F. G., Kellison, J. G., Boyd, S. J., & Kopak, A. (2010). A methodology for conducting integrative mixed methods research and data analyses. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 4*(4), 342–360.
- Castro, F. G., Marsiglia, F. F., Kulis, S., & Kellison, J. G. (2010). Lifetime segmented assimilation trajectories and health outcomes in Latino and other community residents. *American Journal of Public Health, 100*(4), 669–676.
- Colder, C. R. (2001). Life stress, physiological and subjective indexes of negative emotionality, and coping reasons for drinking: Is there evidence for a self-medication model of alcohol use? *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 15*(3), 237.
- Collins, R. L., & McNair, L. D. (2002). Minority women and alcohol use. *Alcohol Research & Health: the Journal of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 26*(4), 251–256.
- Cook, W. K., & Caetano, R. (2014). Ethnic drinking cultures, gender, and socioeconomic status in Asian American and Latino drinking. *Alcoholism, Clinical and Experimental Research, 38*(12), 3043–3051.
- Cooper, M. L., Frone, M. R., Russell, M., & Mudar, P. (1995). Drinking to regulate positive and negative emotions: A motivational model of alcohol use. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(5), 990.
- Corbin, J., Strauss, A., & Strauss, A. L. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Corbin, W. R., Vaughan, E. L., & Fromme, K. (2008). Ethnic differences and the closing of the sex gap in alcohol use among college-bound students. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 22*(2), 240.
- Crockett, L. J., Iturbide, M. I., Stone, T., McGinley, R. A., Rafaelli, M., & Carlo, G. (2007). Acculturative stress, social support, and coping: Relations to psychological adjustment among Mexican American College Students. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 13*(4), 347–355. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.13.4.347>.
- Drainoni, M., Farrell, C., Sorensen-Alawad, A., Palmisano, J. N., Chaisson, C., & Walley, A. Y. (2014). Patient perspectives of an integrated program of medical care and substance use treatment. *AIDS Patient Care and STDs, 28*(2), 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.1089/apc.2013.0179>.
- Gil, R. M., & Vasquez, C. I. (1996). *The Maria paradox: How latinas can merge old world traditions with New World self-esteem*. New York, NY: Berkley Publishing Group.
- Hari, J. (2015). *Chasing the scream: The first and last days of the war on drugs*. Bloomsbury.
- Hasking, P., Lyvers, M., & Carpio, C. (2011). The relationship between coping strategies, alcohol expectancies, drinking motives and drinking behaviour. *Addictive Behaviors, 36*(5), 479–487.
- Kulis, S., Marsiglia, F. F., & Nagoshi, J. L. (2012). Gender roles and substance use among Mexican American adolescents: A relationship moderated by acculturation? *Substance Use & Misuse, 47*(3), 214–229.
- Lopez-Class, M., Castro, F. G., & Ramirez, A. G. (2011). Conceptions of acculturation: A review and statement of critical issues. *Social Science & Medicine, 72*(9), 1555–1562.
- Luke, D., Allen, P., Arian, G., Crawford, M., Headen, S., Spigner, C., et al. (2001). Teens' images of smoking and smokers. *Public Health Reports, 116*(1 suppl), 194–202.
- Madriz, E. I. (1998). Using focus groups with lower socioeconomic status Latina women. *Qualitative Inquiry, 4*(1), 114–128.
- Marin, G., & Gamba, R. J. (1996). A new measurement of acculturation for hispanics: The bidimensional acculturation scale for hispanics (BAS). *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 18*(3), 297–316.
- Martins, J. S., Bartholow, B. D., Cooper, M. L., Von Gunten, C. D., & Wood, P. K. (2018). Associations between executive functioning, affect-regulation drinking motives, and alcohol use and problems. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 32*(1), 16.
- Mermelstein, R., & Group, T. C. N. W. (1999). Explanations of ethnic and gender differences in youth smoking: A multi-site, qualitative investigation. *Nicotine & Tobacco Research, 1*(Suppl\_1), S91–S98.
- Mills, B. A., & Caetano, R. (2012). Decomposing associations between acculturation and drinking in Mexican Americans. *Alcoholism, Clinical and Experimental Research, 36*(7), 1205–1211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-0277.2011.01712.x>.
- Moreno, C. L. (2007). The relationship between culture, gender, structural factors, abuse, trauma, and HIV/AIDS for Latinas. *Qualitative Health Research, 17*(3), 340–352.
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2005). *Helping patients who drink too much: A clinician's guide*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Raffaelli, M., Stone, R. A. T., Iturbide, M. I., McGinley, M., Carlo, G., & Crockett, L. J. (2007). Acculturation, gender, and alcohol use among Mexican American college students. *Addictive Behaviors, 32*(10), 2187–2199.
- Sanchez, M., Rosa, M., Blackson, T. C., Sastre, G., & Rojas, P. (2014). Pre and post immigration alcohol use trajectories among recent Latino immigrants. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 28*(4), 990–999.
- Slone, L. B., Norris, F. H., Gutiérrez Rodríguez, F., Gutiérrez Rodríguez, J. J., Murphy, A. M., & Perilla, J. L. (2006). Alcohol use and misuse in urban Mexican men and women:

- An epidemiologic perspective. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 85(2), 163–170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2006.04.006>.
- Unger, J. B., Shakib, S., Gallaher, P., & Ritt-Olson, A. (2006). Cultural/interpersonal values and smoking in an ethnically diverse sample of Southern California adolescents. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 13(1), 55.
- Wagner, K. D., Davidson, P. J., Pollini, R. A., Strathdee, S. A., Washburn, R., & Palinkas, L. A. (2012). Reconciling incongruous qualitative and quantitative findings in mixed methods research: Exemplars from research with drug using populations. *The International Journal of Drug Policy*, 23(1), 54–61.
- Wilsnack, R. W., Wilsnack, S. C., Gmel, G., & Kantor, L. W. (2016). Gender differences in binge drinking: Prevalence, predictors, and consequences. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews*, 38(1), E1–20.
- Zayas, L. H., Rojas, M., & Malgady, R. G. (1998). Alcohol and drug use, and depression among Hispanic men in early adulthood. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(3), 425–438.
- Zemore, S. E. (2005). Re-examining whether and why acculturation relates to drinking outcomes in a rigorous, National survey of Latinos. *Alcoholism, Clinical and Experimental Research*, 29(12), 2144–2153. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.alc.0000191775.01148.c0>.