THE SOCIOECONOMIC STRATIFICATION SYSTEM IN COLOMBIA: HOW A GOVERNMENTAL SUBSIDY DISTRIBUTION MECHANISM SERVES TO DEMARCATE BOUNDARIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED ON THE FOURTH DAY OF MAY 2021

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

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FOR THE DEGREE

OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines Colombia's socioeconomic stratification system (SES), an official scheme to classify the country's housing stock into six strata in order to cross-subsidize utility rates. Established in law in 1994, the SES assigns strata to residential buildings based on their physical characteristics and the amenities available in the surrounding neighborhood. In the popular imagination and among researchers, the SES has come to be understood as more than a system that classifies housing: strata are a part of Colombians' personal identities, listed on dating profiles and instrumentalized in studies as a demographic category alongside sex and race. This dissertation is guided by two research questions. First, how has the significance of the SES changed such that the system, intended originally to classify dwellings, is now also understood to categorize individuals into distinct social classes? Second, do the categories of the SES function as symbolic boundaries that reinforce patterns of hierarchy and exclusion? To answer these questions, I consider two bodies of evidence. I begin with a comprehensive review of published academic articles that make reference to the SES. Examining a corpus of 52 articles and reports published in English and Spanish, I find that 17 articles misconstrue strata as based on personal characteristics such as income or educational attainment. I argue that the prevalence of this error demonstrates that Colombians have attached meanings and implications to the SES beyond its original intent, and that these reinterpretations are held firmly and uncritically, even by experts. To elucidate how the SES is understood by Colombians of diverse perspectives, I also analyze 31 semi-structured interviews conducted with residents of Medellín. The set of interview participants includes residents of housing classified across all six strata, the most comprehensive cross-section of Colombian society yet represented in a project of this type. With evidence from these interviews, I show how narratives that rely on the strata system have interplayed with other conceptual repertoires that Colombians draw on to make sense of socioeconomic class, focusing especially on repertoires rooted in the specific economic history and regional identity of Antioquia. I argue that the strata system has compounded the symbolic boundaries that exist in Colombian society, and that it has been assimilated into racist and classist ideologies. I conclude with an argument for the moral necessity of advancing equity and centering the voices of the oppressed in policymaking and academic research.

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I would like to acknowledge that this dissertation was written upon and focuses on the traditional lands of several indigenous peoples, both past and present.

**In New Orleans/Bulbancha**, I would like to recognize the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Tunica-Biloxi Indian Tribe of Louisiana. In Louisiana more broadly, I would like to acknowledge the Addai Caddo Tribe, the Biloxi-Chitimacha Confederation of Muskogee, Choctaw-Apache Community of Ebarb, Clifton Choctaw, Four Winds Tribe Louisiana Cherokee Confederacy, Grand Caillou/Dulac Band, Isle de Jean Charles Band, Louisiana Choctaw Tribe, Pointe-Au-Chien Indian Tribe, and the United Houma Nation (Beloved Community 2020:2).

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**Black Lives Matter/Las Vidas Negras Importan**
Today and always, I honor and center Black communities. The topics of race, systems of oppression, and symbolic boundaries discussed in this dissertation have real life-and-death consequences. I am committed to continuing to interrogate and address ways in which biases, racism, anti-Blackness, white supremacy and intersectionality impact my personal, research, and organizational decisions.

**It Takes a Village**
It is hard to believe that as an early adolescent, I had just moved to the United States and did not speak English. This dissertation represents an incredible journey of growth, challenges, and community support.

Gracias a mi mamá por darme seguridad desde niña y ayudarme a ver mis capacidades y valores. Gracias a mi papá por tantos sacrificios, por llevarme, traerme, apoyarme. Gracias a los dos por todo lo que han hecho por mi toda la vida. Gracias a Nano, Juan Pablo y a toda mi familia por creer en mí, en mis sueños y por tanto amor. Juli, gracias por todas las trasnochadas, las ilustraciones, los consejos.

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Finally, thank you to my husband for all the love, the patience, the cooking. I cannot imagine going through this experience without you by my side. You have taught me so much about putting others first and about consistency and perseverance. I love you. Thank you to my Caldwell Ravotti family for taking me in and treating me as one of yours for the past ten years. I am humbled and honored to be part of this family.

We are at a critical juncture where equity is at the forefront of our rhetoric. I thank movements like Black Lives Matter and local organizations like Beloved Community for centering these important issues and allowing for new relevant perspectives. As I analyze the SES in Colombia, it is central that I keep in mind other symbolic boundaries that represent important collective imaginaries that determine who belongs in society. The intersectionality of individuals studied in this research is crucial to a comprehensive study. I thank activists and scholars of Color who have overcome so many systemic barriers to speak truth to power and for knowledge creation that roots my understanding of the pursuit of equity and have deeply informed this work.

To the Graduating Class of 2021 at Bard Early College in New Orleans
I dedicate my work to you. You represent a brighter and more equitable future. You have what it takes.

Para mis sobrinas Sarah y Sofía López Urrego
Ustedes tienen las capacidades y valores para hacer lo que se propongan. Las quiero mucho.

To my husband, Peter Caldwell
I love you

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was a little girl, I learned that there was a wall being built between my neighborhood and the adjacent one. I asked my parents what was going on, and they explained that the people who lived on the other side of the wall were of a lower socioeconomic stratum, and as a result, our neighborhood built the wall to prevent "thieves" from crossing over to our side. My parents were particularly upset with the uneven dynamic, because the residents on our side were given keys to a door which gave us access to the other side. Residents often crossed over in order to buy groceries at cheaper prices. These events took place in the early 90s in Bogotá, D.C., soon after the Colombian government introduced the Socioeconomic Stratification System (SES).

The SES is an official classification mechanism used by the government to determine eligibility for subsidies. This system classifies housing in six categories depending on a dwelling's features, surrounding area, and urban context. The rates of the subsidies vary depending on the stratum. Residents of housing classified within the lowest three strata receive subsidies for their utilities, with residents of stratum one receiving the highest subsidies and residents of stratum three the lowest. Housing categorized as stratum four is considered to host middle-income residents, who are thus charged market rates for their utilities. Finally, housing classified as strata five and six is considered to host the wealthiest portions of the population. These residents are charged higher prices for utilities, which the architects of the SES intended would help to fund subsidies for the impoverished.

Sociologist Consuelo Uribe-Mallarino contends that the SES has become the predominant way in which Colombians living in urban spaces think about social order. This phenomenon is evidenced by the way people use the SES informally: "The power that the SES has to classify marks the identity of Colombians to such degree that, when looking for a partner, the SES is included in personal announcements [dating applications] as a personal descriptor alongside sex, physical build, and age." (Uribe-Mallarino 2008). [1]


*Figure 1- Stratum displayed in utility bill (BBC News Mundo 2014)*

As I got older, I continued to notice that the SES was central to the narrative of social class. Far from a merely technical or bureaucratic instrument, the categories of

[1] This excerpt was translated by the author. All translations in this dissertation are translated by the author unless otherwise noted.

the SES were so familiar and such a part of the Colombian vernacular that they figured in popular sayings and jokes. I heard people talk about a “stratum seven vacation” or a “stratum zero outfit.” This kind of humor persists in Colombian online culture. Memes making reference to the SES circulate on social media, especially on Facebook and WhatsApp. These memes are an example of how the SES was assimilated into existing prejudices. Note that several of the memes that follow display racist and classist “humor.”


*Figure 2 (Google Images Search 2021)*

When I moved to the United States, I realized that the SES was not the norm outside of Colombia and that, at first glance, from an outsider's perspective, it resembled a caste system as much as a subsidy distribution mechanism. With time and distance, I grew more curious about circumstances that I had previously taken for granted. How did a cross-subsidy program created by bureaucrats in the mid-90s reach such prominence in the public consciousness? And what are the social consequences when, in a country that ranks among the most economically unequal in the world, public officials explicitly divide residential spaces into socioeconomic strata?

This dissertation has grown from that curiosity. It is animated by two questions:

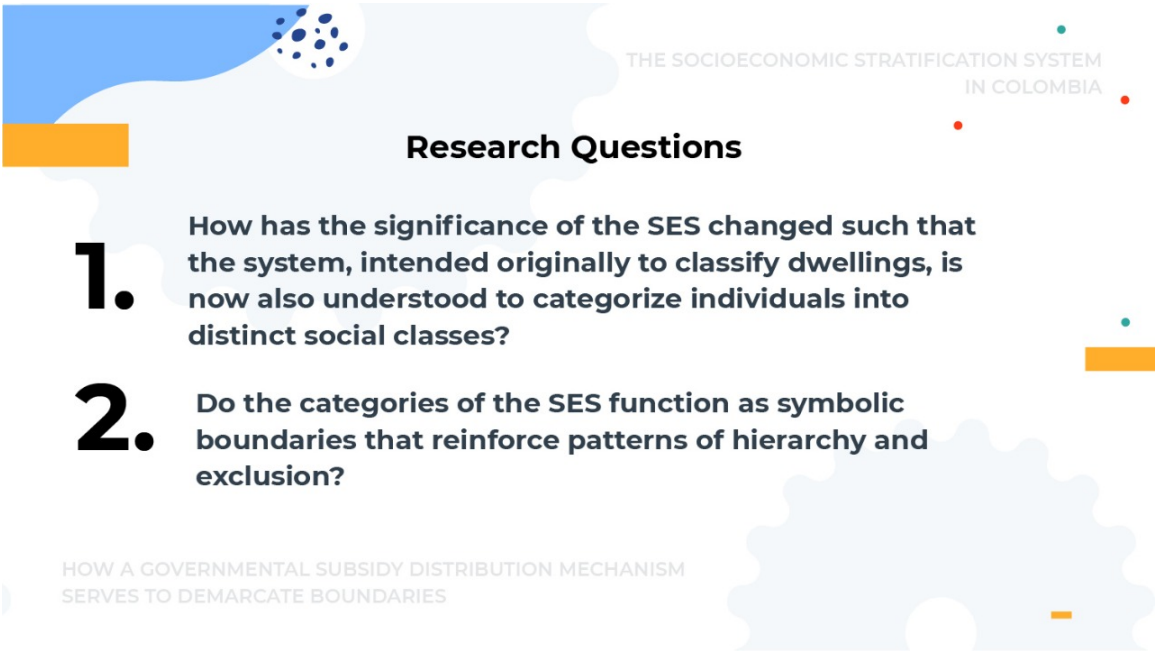



*Figure 3 (González Díez 2021)*

To answer these questions, I examine two sets of evidence. First, I analyze a comprehensive corpus of peer-reviewed academic articles that refer to the SES. Of the 52 articles and reports that I review, I find that 17 fundamentally mischaracterize the strata system, assuming that strata are determined by personal characteristics such as income or educational attainment, when in fact they are based purely on the features of buildings and their surroundings. I argue that this error in expert discourse exemplifies how the SES has grown from a government subsidy program based on housing and neighborhood characteristics into a broader marker for a person's interpretation of what is meant by class, economic stability, and a citizen's general worth in society. The extension of the meaning of the SES into this broader marker has implications, as the SES was not designed to be used as a marker for class boundaries in Colombia. The fact that even experts and academics are comfortably mis-characterizing the SES demonstrates how much the SES has permeated Colombian society without the critical lens one would expect from scholars. To gain insight into how the SES has been adapted by society in general, I conducted and analyzed 31 semi-structured interviews with residents of Medellin. These residents are the most comprehensive cross-section of Colombian society interviewed for a research project of this design and topic considering the interviews represent all six strata. The evidence I gathered from these interviews provided me with examples of the narratives that Colombian citizens have surrounding the creation and implementation of the SES. I demonstrate how these SES societal narratives interplay and co-exist with other conceptual repertoires that Colombians use to organize their own views of socioeconomic class. I particularly focus

on the repertoires which are rooted in the specific economic history and regional identity of Antioquia. My argument is that the SES has grown into more than simply a method for determining subsidies; it is now a societal and cultural phenomenon that has been re-purposed by experts and ordinary citizens alike to draw and reinforce the symbolic boundaries that exist in Colombian society. This re-imagining of the SES as a boundary has allowed for its assimilation into racist and classist ideologies, which threatens the oppressed people of Colombia who already face innumerable other barriers and boundaries. I conclude by arguing that policymakers and academics have a moral imperative to center the voices of these oppressed and strive towards equity in Colombian society.

In the preceding paragraphs I have provided a summarized version of my research and findings. Now I want to place my work in the context of how my own understanding of this topic has evolved and brought me to the point I am at today. What I am now going to share with you is a “peek behind the curtain” into how this project has changed my thinking and how the changes in my thinking have influenced the course of this project. Since I first began research this topic seven years ago, I have increasingly found myself on a journey to dismantle white supremacy and strive for equity. As one grapples with questions about equity, one finds that this is deeply a personal process that forces us to face realities about our own roles in contributing to injustice.

What I learned as I went through this transformational process and answered the dissertation research questions was the importance to question where we are departing from. To ask ourselves: what framework are we using? Who are we centering? What hegemonic narratives are influencing our way of thinking, our perspectives? Instead of thinking about the SES on its own terms (for example, just asking if it is effective at doing what it is supposed to do), I reevaluated the intentions behind welfare programs, the way they are designed, who gets to make decisions about them. I realized that the hegemonic narratives that are foundational to the creation and understanding of the SES are often the same hegemonic narratives that are foundational to the tools we use in academia to then measure social implications like the SES.

The process of unlearning internalized biases (or trying to) is a long and complicated one. We are in a historical moment in the United State where social justice is a buzz word. We receive equity statements from our employers and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) trainings at our universities, and an increasing percentage of the population acknowledges that representation is important and the voices of the oppressed must be heard. But what does that mean? What is the practice of that? Even though institutions are making efforts, given that society has been founded on hegemonic forces that make society inequitable, much more must be done to achieve even a semblance of equity.

In the academic context, it is not as simple as applying social justice theories to our work. I use this dissertation as an example of the difficulties of grappling with this

content in a way that truly centers equity. My claims in this work are not final as I do not hold the truth. The truth lies with the people who are most impacted by this policy and who are not centered or included in the decision-making process. The process of this dissertation, and the way I grant the reader access to how I internally grapple with the contradictions of our society, is as important as the evidence shared.

Language and representation matter. To truly understand the implications of the SES and recommendations for future plans, the communities who are impacted by this system need to be the ones to determine who is involved and how we go about it. Therefore, my hope is that this dissertation helps trigger those conversations. To change the framework from which people depart.

What's most valuable about this dissertation is: the voices of the subjects that I was able to capture; my own insight reached through my intersectionality; and the way I open this journey for other people to see. The process of disentangling myself from the ivory tower are as important as the questions I'm asking and the answers I'm choosing.

As a graduate student, I devoted years to researching this topic from different disciplines and asking several research questions. I learned that scholars had criticized the effectiveness of the SES as a subsidy distribution system. I confirmed that Colombians have adopted the SES in colloquial speech. And most importantly, I found that few academics were paying attention to the system's broad social consequences.

In 2017, I published my master's thesis, *The Socioeconomic Stratification System in Colombia: How a Governmental Subsidy Distribution Mechanism Has Altered the*

*Identity of Its People* (Lopez Caldwell 2017). In it, I contended that the SES was designed with good intentions to alleviate the precarious conditions of the impoverished. Despite these intentions, I claimed, the system shifted social dynamics and affected understandings of class identity. However, my analysis of the SES in my master's thesis was highly informed by a set of values that were inherently biased.

I recognize that the ivory tower of education presents many challenges that can impede research that seeks to advance equity. In my thesis, I was preoccupied with understanding the SES using frameworks that were highly academic and therefore widely accepted by the status quo. As a result, I was attempting to understand the SES from within another hegemonic system (academia). What I mean by that is that the hegemonic narratives that are foundational to the creation and understanding of the SES are often the same hegemonic narratives that are foundational to the tools we use in academia to then measure social implications like the SES. The same academic structures that provided me the opportunity to perform my research also upholds and reinforces bias to my research. Previously I was biased by the hegemonic forces that dictate who possesses the truth, who "deserves" to be supported, and how we should understand the world that we live in. This dissertation represents a real-time journey in which I have had to unlearn many biases which have significantly changed the framework from which I now depart.

The impact of academia is not limited to our scholarly output, but also, to our own experiences.

> I came to [the workforce outside of academia] as a recovering academic, having internalized much of the white supremacist logic that punctuates higher education: perfectionism, workaholism and a chronic sense of urgency, and a tendency toward ego. -Faith Kares (Kares 2021)

Like Faith Kares, I too had to fight against the consequences of white supremacy in higher education. The most poignant implication for me was imposter syndrome. To combat this, I leaned into my community, and I talked about my vulnerability with friends who shared their own stories. Speaking about these oppressive feelings was an important part of the journey. Their brilliance was obvious to me and, by witnessing their wisdom, I discovered my own voice and began to recognize the important contributions that I offer this field. My unique positionality with insider access to the Colombian imaginary and my training in the United States is instrumental. I bridge theoretical content with lived experiences as a Colombian citizen. I offer robust data gathered from semi-structured interviews that were accessed based on my cultural capital and understanding the local context. I then offer insightful assessment of the responses and juxtapose them to repertoires that are both local and transnational. I am able to offer these important considerations while maintaining a critical social justice lens.

My personal experience fighting against the tropes of white supremacy can be contrasted to the need for Colombian citizens to question the narratives imposed by the SES. When we understand the systemic issues at play that are foundational to all interactions and social negotiations, the questions that we ask, and our understanding of what used to be a given, utterly change. As a result of the deep personal journey that

I have taken to grapple with the narratives that we have been fed as a society for centuries, my analysis of the SES has shifted as I have gained clarity. It is easy to name systemic issues that plague our society, but it a lot harder to recognize the biases that are encrypted in all that we do, in the tools that we use to assess society, and in the voices that we prioritize. As a result, to truly go against the grain, it is required that we have deep changes not only with our understanding of the world, but our attitudes and the framework from which we depart. In order to change our understanding of the fabric and foundation of our society, we need to engage in a lifelong journey of unlearning and re-framing all that we are exposed to. This is a result of centuries-long narrative creation that we need to fight against.

I have decided to be vulnerable and to share my growth and mistakes along the way as I believe this is a compelling way for others to follow suit. We all have biases, and the only way to improve and grow is to go through an uncomfortable journey of unlearning, questioning, and being gentle with ourselves in the process. My goal is to encourage others to recognize that we all will be making mistakes along the way, and that should not stop us from embarking on this important and empowering journey. Moreover, although I have made strides in unpacking and unlearning systems that are meant to separate us and stigmatize us, there is always more to learn. I welcome you to challenge the concepts, terminology and assessments explored in this dissertation so that we can learn from each other. You can reach me at anamarialopezcaldwell@gmail.com. The goal is to advance this work in the name of equity. The more thought partnership and collaboration, the better.

As a result of the above-mentioned shift in mindset and framework, I no longer argue that the SES was designed with good intentions. The SES is inherently discriminatory. It was designed with neoliberal conventions of meritocracy which assume that those who are in the lower socioeconomic spectrum have gotten their due to stereotypes like laziness, lack of ability, and lack of a moral compass. Those stereotypes are also closely linked to people's identities such as race, gender and sexual orientation. Take for example Darrin Kerlin's [2] thoughts on the SES in Colombia. Darrin came from a humble background and lived at a stratum five neighborhood when I interviewed him.

> *Darrin:* I would like to share something with you. Here in Colombia and I think worldwide, the SES is only used for one purpose, to measure real estate and other aspects of the life of each person. But I think there are only two strata: rich and poor. This is in reference to Colombia. Although I think it probably applies to the rest of Latin America.
>
> For Colombian society, to be low class is the same as to belong to stratum one. For the state, being low class is being strata one or two and they look at people in those strata with discrimination. This discrimination starts with the local businesses, the financial sector. There are businesses whose name I will not mention that discriminate people who live in strata one and two because they say they are low class. Even if the person in strata one has talent, they are not hired.
>
> In 1998 I did research in college about this. I told 40 of my classmates about this. I said to them, "Do you want proof that there is racial and social discrimination in Colombia? Then go to Bancolombia and Conavi;[3] you will not be able to find a single Black bank teller." Let's start there. If you go and ask in certain businesses here in Medellín, there are people who are not allowed to work there. They are not allowed to work there because [the people in the businesses] believe that they are disobedient, thieves, they are framed. They are discriminated in a way that I think should not be. Human beings should be valued.

[2] All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.
[3] Bancolombia and Conavi are Colombian banks.

> *Ana María:* What is the relationship that you see between race and SES?
>
> *Darrin:* At the macro level, there is discrimination due to race, whether you are Indigenous, Black, and there is discrimination due to education level, geographical location of your house. If you live in a specific stratum like four or five, you are important for the businesses in your city, you are important for the best universities. If you are strata one or two, universities will not open up their doors to you the same way they open them up to strata four and five, like these universities: Bolivariana, Universidad de Medellín and Eafit.

Darrin shares the unfortunate consequences that he observes playing out in Colombia due to the SES and other systems that enable society to demarcate symbolic boundaries[4] from which to discriminate.

The SES system was created within the confines of a white supremacist culture in which those in power dictated how they thought they should "help" those in need. By framing the SES as a benevolent support for those lacking resources, policy makers (knowingly or not) are distracting society from paying attention to the colossal structural issues at play and focusing on a support system that represents less than one percent of the nations' GDP.

Public utility companies were sold and privatized and the nation's debt grew as these companies accepted loans with money borrowed by the state from international sources. The transfer of tax pesos did not happen from the state to its citizens. It happened from the state to the private sector. This privatization happened without

---

[4] Symbolic Boundaries' are the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others. These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power. The term 'symbolic boundaries' also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular. (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015)

proper accountability measures regarding the quality of the infrastructure needed to provide for all citizens. The result is a vast disparity of infrastructure by stratum. For example, there are many strata one neighborhoods that are without adequate water pressure or access to electricity. What is the point of offering subsidies on services that are inadequate? These disparities disproportionally impact Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities. There was a preview of this through Darrin's insight and it can also be observed through the distribution of SES by ethno-racial groups displayed below.

**Figura 10. Personas por estrato socioeconómco de la vivienda según el grupo étnico**[16]

| | **PERSONAS** | | **PERTENECE O SE CONSIDERA:** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Estrato de la vivienda | Total | % | Indígena | Negro(a), mulato, afrocolombiano, afrodescendiente | Mestizo | Blanco | Raizal | No sabe/No responde |
| Bajo Bajo | 298.851 | 12,62 | 395 | 17.213 | 239.726 | 34.979 | 33 | 6.506 |
| Bajo | 877.037 | 37,03 | 1.002 | 20.577 | 727.388 | 110.160 | 443 | 17.469 |
| Medio Bajo | 701.963 | 29,64 | 300 | 10.207 | 566.769 | 113.655 | 220 | 10.812 |
| Medio | 235.822 | 9,96 | 179 | 1.431 | 180.007 | 51.368 | | 2.837 |
| Medio Alto | 161.467 | 6,82 | | 620 | 114.752 | 43.623 | 45 | 2.427 |
| Alto | 93.142 | 3,93 | | 319 | 60.942 | 31.731 | | 150 |
| **TOTAL** | **2.368.282** | **100,00** | **1876** | **50.367** | **1.889.584** | **385.516** | **741** | **40.201** |
| % | 100,00 | | 8,00% | 2,13 | 79,79 | 16 | 0,03 | 1,70 |

*Figure 4 (Sandoval 2010) Percentage of people living in each stratum based on race and ethnicity in Medellín*

Instead of focusing on the structural issues that have led to the unevenness of utility provision in the country, the SES facilitates a paternalistic and deceptive framing of access to utilities. This dissertation will uncover many problematics that get at the foundation from which we think about said system and engage with it.

The narrative of the SES flips the script from the state's responsibility to offer equal quality and access of utilities for all citizens to a paternalistic narrative. It tells the story of offering support to those with more pressing needs. This narrative at its core has a double standard rooted in who belongs and is deserving and who does not. The upper middle and upper class, majority white, benefit from state investment in infrastructure as well as many other structural advantages. Those in the lower socioeconomic spectrum are not only neglected by state investment but are also ostracized by structural issues that are out of their individual control. This double standard is so deeply rooted in the psyche of Colombian citizens that it is hard to readily identify it even when it happens in front of our noses. Take, for example, Reynaldo, a participant that I interviewed for this dissertation. He lives in stratum four and through his answers he demonstrates that he sees the needs of those he categorizes as other to be less pressing than the needs of those that he sees as belonging to his same rank. When talking about subsidy programs in the country, he states:

> However, the issue is that what is actually happening is backwards, we have funding, we support and what happens is that you end up not doing anything because the government is supporting you. I say this because I used to work with international funding from the foundation Mi Sangre[5]. I would talk to them

[5] The Fundación Mi Sangre is a non-profit organization founded by Colombian artist Juanes. Their vision is to "Activate ecosystems and build capabilities that enable new generations to lead the construction of a peace culture in Colombia." (Mi Sangre Foundation 2020b)

> about resources, and they would say: No, Reynaldo, I don't want those resources for empowering and entrepreneurship.
>
> This is because international NGOs were giving out from three to five million pesos[6] per month to a land worker, you wouldn't believe it. I mean, that's millions of pesos. If you told me I would earn five million in Medellín, that is enough to live tightly. But five million for them, trust me, they are basically millionaires.

Here, Reynaldo demonstrates he is appalled by the large sum of money given to land workers in the form of what he considers handouts. It is clear he sees land workers as less deserving than urban residents of Medellín, although he may be taking into consideration the cost of living in both areas. Undoubtedly it is more expensive to live in the city. However, it is also evident that Reynaldo places farmers in a different category. One that assumes that land workers do not deserve to spend discretionary income in the same way that upper middle-class people do. Reynaldo shared his thoughts in a factual manner without noticing the double standard and discrimination in his statement. This instance exemplifies the dissonance that exists in Colombia and the tolerance for inequality depending on cultural membership. The same dissonance is observed within the SES.

In sum, the SES is deeply inequitable. It reverses the narrative by taking away responsibility from the state and uplifting social hierarchies and stigmatization. The SES has been able to shape the collective imaginary in this way given that it is built upon many hegemonic narratives that fuel and reinforce each other. When studying this topic, one tends to stay within the confines from which it was constructed. Thus,

[6] 800 to 1300 US dollars (applying currency exchange on April 24, 2021).

oftentimes it is difficult to recognize the harm that this framework is causing. I am not claiming that the SES was designed in a malicious way. I am maintaining that the SES is inherently biased and deceiving.

This dissertation shows my journey through ridding myself of learned oppressive frameworks that have been growing and reinforcing for centuries in the making. This work contributes to the conversation by helping politicians, scholars and anyone who picks up this document, to understand that many narratives that have been fed to us are hurtful to our society. These narratives are hurtful to everyone and particularly those who do not identify as cisgender able young white males. Once we are able to shift our framework, understanding the SES will take a different meaning. This document will help readers recalibrate their understanding of the SES and the role of the government in upholding social justice[7] for all of its citizens. This document is also instrumental for anyone interested in redistributive programs. It is imperative that we as a society pay more attention to the social implications of any system. This is particularly important when the people most impacted by said systems are not decision-makers in the process (something that should not happen but is often the norm).

Even if the SES decision makers were/are not aware of the implications of this system, they have a responsibility to society to inform themselves, ask critical questions and do right by their constituents. Ignorance is not a sufficient excuse. Before asking the

[7] Why social justice and not human rights? Because this is a rhetorically inflated claim which offers a contradiction. It is supposed to mean universal norms. Yet the language of human rights has "come to provide the dominant mode of expression for political claims today." The malleable language of human rights allows for transnational corporations and military powers to have a justification for actions that are self-serving (Golder 2014).

research questions for this dissertation, it is imperative to ask: what is the foundation onto which the SES was created? I invite you to go on this journey with me. I encourage you to be open, to challenge yourself as you come up with your own conclusions. Ask yourself along the way: am I centering the Colombian society? Or am I centering the experience of those in power? Am I assuming I know what is right for certain communities, or am I getting data from them?

There were a couple of interviews that, at first, I took at face value without realizing the important insight that they contained. For example, when I interviewed Celesta, a woman who had been displaced by the war and was houseless**,** she shared that she was able to get potable water at the local police station. At the time, I did not think much about that answer. However, after deeply reflecting on her situation, I realized that I was wrong to just accept her answer as an ordinary occurrence. Below is part of the interview:

> *Ana María:* What's your address?
>
> *Celesta:* I don't have an address, because I live in La Iguaná as a displaced person in a makeshift plastic structure. They tore it down, but some nice people are letting me sleep next to theirs. At the police station they give me water for showers and cooking.
>
> *Ana María:* Please describe a person who is rich.
>
> *Celesta:* I know a woman, Doña Marina, I am not sure if they are rich or not, you see it in the lifestyle, the houses and cars. One day I was coming from the hospital feeling fragile and I said hi to Doña Marina. I talked to her and wow, now I go to her and she helps me in a very impressive way. She does not say no to me, she gives me free food, money to buy candy [Celesta sells candy under a bridge], she has helped me so much. I only met her recently but there have been other people who have been good to me.

*Ana María:* Please describe a person who is poor.

*Celesta:* Me, I have suffered many acts of violence. They [unclear who][8] killed my dad, my daughter's father, my nephew killed himself using drugs recently, I have suffered.

*Ana María:* Do you think it is the same to be poor than to live in strata one?

*Celesta:* That difference is drawn by the government.

*Ana María:* What do you mean?

*Celesta:* Hm, what can I tell you? Ok, for example I am stratum zero. I do not have a stratum because I don't have any money. I have a couple of friends who live in strata one, and they pay the same as some who live in strata two, same price for utilities, gas, so it is very similar.

*Ana María:* What about the difference between strata two and three?

*Celesta:* It is higher at that point. They have a bit more power, I guess.

*Ana María:* And how does one see that?

*Celesta:* It's probably in the way the government handles things. Because in this country we have it tough. Those who are displaced…it's been two years since I received any help. They lowered [payments], they froze them. I have not had a home for the past 11 years. I have been struggling to claim my payments but have not succeeded. That is the governments' fault.

*Ana María:* When you were little, what stratum were your parents?

*Celesta:* Deep poverty. I am not sure what stratum we were, but the truth is that we lived in terrible poverty.

*Ana María:* So your decision not to go back has to do with safety?

[8] While Celesta does not specify the perpetrators that drove her to migrate to Medellín, it is likely to be the FARC. A report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) lists 411 people (143 families) as being displaced from Amalfi in 2007. The government was able to provide refugee camps for 45 families. In terms of subsidies, the Comité Municipal de Atención Integral a la Población Desplazada (CMAIPD) (The Municipal Committee for the Comprehensive Set of Fundamental Rights for Displaced Populations) agreed to hand out the following items to support refugee families to return back to Amalfi: 2 cleaning kits, a kitchen kit, one blanket and one sheet per family. (OCHA 2011)

> *Celesta:* Yes, safety, and also I don't feel comfortable there anymore. There are so many sorrows. However, the main reason is the danger. I had to sue all of the perpetrators, so that's the main concern.

Celesta found herself houseless because she had to escape a civil war that the government was largely responsible for. The government has a commitment to relocate her and offer the necessary supports. Even by human rights standards, the right for governmental support after being displaced by a war and the right of access to potable water are among the most basic rights a person is owed in order to have a dignified life. Yet poverty and lack of access is so common that, in a way, I was desensitized. I could not see something as simple as a woman being denied her rights. Instead, I thought, "hm, it is really sad that she is houseless, but at least she is getting help from the local police station.[9]" My thoughts here reveal my biased understanding of her situation. I saw her as responsible for solving this issue, without taking into account the responsibility of the state. These thoughts are evidence that I was looking at the issue from a paternalistic perspective as opposed to recognizing the atrocity of the situation and the fact that she should be protected and treated as a war victim who deserves so much more from her community.

La Iguaná, the neighborhood that Celesta references, was established and developed by individual residents on the side of a creek. From time to time the authorities evict the residents. These unstable structures do not have access to any kind

[9] The majority of the members of the police and military are rank and file who in some instances have had no choice (or have perceived that they have no choice) but to join this line of work. They are paid unfair wages and are not given proper training. Yet members of these groups overwhelmingly abuse their power and often serve as a vehicle for discrimination and oppression in the name of the state.

of utility infrastructure and thus are not included in the SES. La Iguaná is depicted below. Notice the structures on the left side of the picture.

*Figure 5 (Tiempo 2017)*

When I first interviewed Celesta, I was touched by her story and found her situation unfortunate. However, I was not consciously recognizing the full responsibility of the state in this clear example and the numerous ways in which the state had failed her time and time again. Celesta and people like her are neglected by the government and are overlooked in programs like the SES. Celesta calls herself stratum zero and notes that she is houseless and therefore stratum-less. This is a form of symbolic violence and discrimination that is an unintended consequence of this system.

After re-reading the transcripts, I was able to learn so much more. Not because I was not listening the first time around, but because the context had changed for me. I

am sharing my own biases because part of this transformative process is to be vulnerable, to acknowledge that we are working against currents and narratives that are dominant and have existed for centuries. However, the communities that have been oppressed have oftentimes persevered despite what seem like unsurmountable challenges. Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and other subaltern communities are resilient and hold the key to understanding what needs to take place in order to achieve equity. The subaltern needs to be centered; they need to be the decision makers and leaders who can help guide Colombia to a place where all members belong. Finally, part of the process of calling out systemic issue of oppression is also recognizing the strength and work of subaltern communities in their struggle to seek a dignified life. Their resilience is remarkable, impressive, inspiring, and needs to be recognized.

The more we uplift and center the voices of those who are pushed to the margins, the more clarity, insight and solutions we will have access to as a society. The authors that I first cited in this dissertation follow a more traditional structure that is generally accepted by the ivory tower of higher education. Over time, I began looking for important voices from Afro-Colombians and Indigenous people, women scholars, and authors who have helped inform my more nuanced understanding of the world. These authors include Leonardo Reales Jimenez, Tianna Paschel, Ibram X. Kendi, and Kimberlé Creshaw.

**ROADMAP**

The research questions for this dissertation are:

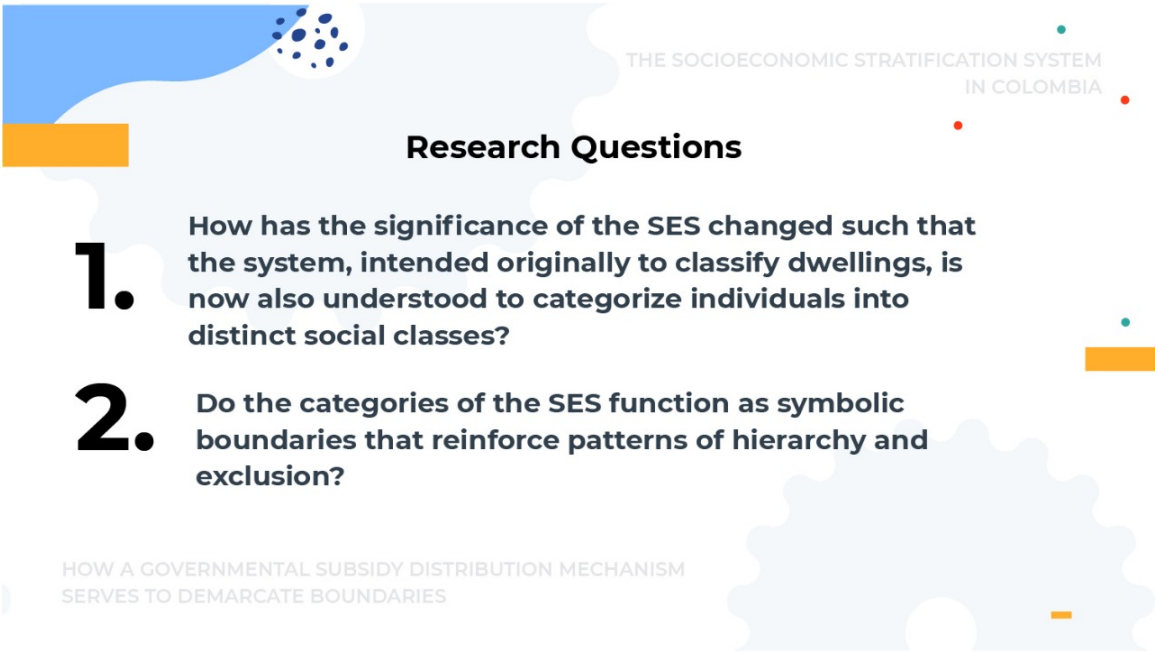



*Figure 6 (González Díez 2021)*

In order to answer the above questions this dissertation will be organized as follows.

**CHAPTER ONE- OVERVIEW OF HOW AND WHY THE SES CAME ABOUT, AS WELL AS SOME UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES** - will offer an overview of the SES. It will discuss why it was created, where it was enacted, when it was first applied, how it has evolved over time, and who was involved in the decision-making process. This chapter will go over the impact at the state and user level which includes:

**At the state level**

1) Corruption in the privatization process
2) Profits went into the hands of the private investors and not the state
3) Colombia was indebted 5 million
4) Private utility companies fired and restructured their departments causing a wave of unemployment

**At the user level**

1) People in lower SES spend a higher % of their income on utilities
2) Access to utilities

   a. as of 2010 about 2% of the urban population and 44% of the rural population in Colombia does not have access to potable water
3) Quality of utilities is subpar in lower SES

Chapter One also goes over some unintended consequences which include the use of the SES by other institutions and the way the SES reinforces negative neoliberal outcomes. Other governmental and non-governmental entities also use the system for their own interests for classification purposes to operationalize activities such as the adjustment of tax rates and university tuition fees. Over time the neoliberal agenda continues to be upheld. Oppressed populations are the ones that bear the brunt of the neoliberal consequences. The transfer of the economic burden from national debt, to corporations, to the most vulnerable populations in the country exacerbates inequity and injustice. Chapter One will serve as an important foundation to understand the SES and its complexities.

**CHAPTER TWO - THE USE OF THE SES IN COLOMBIA BY SCHOLARS: METHODOLOGICAL FLAWS AND REINFORCEMENT OF SOCIAL DIFFERENCES**- answers the first research question: **How has the SES categorization system transformed substantively from a housing label into a class marker of the identity of an individual?** It does this by looking at peer reviewed articles and analyzing how scholars use the SES in their own research. This chapter demonstrates that over 33% of scholars who mention the SES in their peer-reviewed articles do so in a way that demonstrates they are using the SES as a class marker for the individual.

This phenomenon was demonstrated in this introduction through the different memes that exemplify how the SES has become widely known and used in cultural production, in language, advertisement, among other mediums. Chapter Two demonstrates that same phenomenon with scholars being the unit of analysis. This is telling of the deep-rooted impact that the SES has had on society, such that scholars, who are expected to be impartial and to use data accurately, are found using the SES to label individuals and often assuming that the SES measures income. Individuals do not draw boundaries exclusively out of their own experiences. "They borrow from the general cultural repertoires[10] supplied to them by the society in which they live, relying on general definitions of value traits that take on a rule like status" (Lamont 1992:7). Scholars are knowledge producers and have a responsibility in society as they are highly respected, and their words carry a lot of weight. This chapter highlights that scholars are producing a physical record of a trend perceived in Colombian society.

In **Section One**, I analyze peer-reviewed articles that incorporate the SES in Colombia in their work to assess if authors are using this categorization system in keeping with its original purpose. This section will describe and evaluate how the system has been used by scholars. Finally, it will discuss the implications of the results and provide some future recommendations.

[10] Repertoires are cultural tools that are unevenly available across situations and national context. (Lamont and Thévenot 2000:1)

**Section Two** will go over the publications that use the SES as a classification tool for identifying socioeconomic status but will not include papers that have the SES as the main topic of analysis. I deemed it important to exclude such papers, given that they would skew the results. I predicted that this would happen, and my predictions were confirmed as will be shown in **Section Three.** The logic behind this calculation was that if scholars were directly criticizing the system, they most likely had a clear understanding of what the SES was measuring. **Section Four** will discuss some of the repercussions of scholars using the SES inaccurately as tool for their own research. This chapter concludes that scholars use the SES in a way different than the one it was intended for; scholars are contributing to the transformation of the SES into a personal categorization system rather than one that classifies housing. This transformation appears to reinforce differences among citizens rather than minimize them, which alters social interactions as well as peoples' identities. Lastly, these findings point to methodological inconsistencies of those who misuse the SES in their research.

**CHAPTER THREE- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO SITUATE THE SES AS SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES-** This chapter offers important theoretical and historical frameworks in order to ground the research explored in Chapter Five. **Section One** surveys theoretical frameworks starting with the theory of cultural characteristics by Max Weber (1922) and exploring the development of that line of thinking through Michéle Lamont's framework of symbolic boundaries. Furthermore, her theories are problematized by bringing in the intersectionality framework from Kimberlé Crenshaw

to help examine symbolic and social boundaries. Below is a chart summarizing the different theories that will be explored.

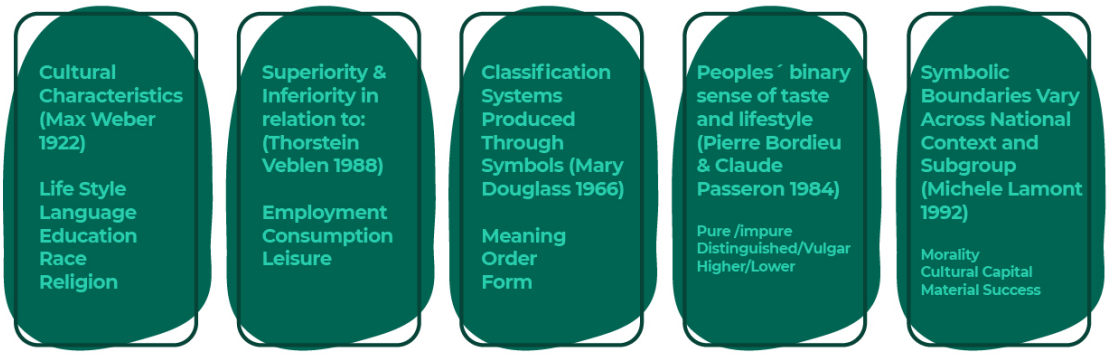



*Figure 7 (González Díez 2021)*

**Section Two** will focus on exploring class in Colombia. Understanding class in Colombia is central to analyzing the SES. The symbolic boundaries that are already used and understood by society to define class undoubtedly have an influence on the understanding of the SES. The SES has been transformed from a housing label to a class marker of identity of individuals. As a result, this class marker needs to be understood in the context of other existing frameworks that inform class and that serve as symbolic boundaries. I identified three different categories that are central to the definition of class in Colombia.

This section will be organized in three parts, each examining one of three repertoires that are central to the definition of class in Colombia. **Part A** will offer a targeted history of Antioquia which will discuss colonization as well as the role of white

supremacy and racism in the region. **Part A** goes over the *Antioqueño* cultural myth of belonging. It will explain the history which has led to the creation of the *Antioqueño* narrative, a narrative rooted in paternalism. **Part B** goes over three important transnational repertoires[11] that deeply inform class in Antioquia: industrialization, neoliberalism and capitalism. **Parc C** covers the four main elements identified as determinants of social inequality in Colombia. These elements are: 1) education level, 2) occupation, 3) geographical and public policy environment, and 4) capital endowment of the families of origin. The SES and the repertoires described in this section interact with one another in a web that is difficult to untangle. Yet, it is crucial to study the origin of these symbolic boundaries to help clarify and further nuance the complex project of identifying and assessing class and identity in Colombia.

[11] The term repertoire in a sociological context was introduced and has steadily been used by Michele Lamont since her early work in the 1990s. In 2000, the term repertoires appeared in her collaborative work with Thévenot in a collection named: Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States. (Silber 2003:429). This is a multiyear collaboration between 11 French and American researchers. They conducted equivalent fieldwork and met periodically to compare notes and coordinate approaches (Eskes and Vieira 2016). In this work Thévenot and Lamont develop the concept of 'national cultural repertoires of evaluation.' They point to cultural tools that are unevenly distributed across situations and contexts. They looked at divergent **"repertoires of evaluation"** in the different contexts to provide systematic framework for empirically comparing cross-national differences. The introductory essay by Lamont and Thévenot argues for the need to unite cultural sociological interests in group boundaries and evaluative criteria as they have developed on either side of the Atlantic and to shift comparative sociology away from an exclusive focus on empirical economic, political, and organizational variations within and between nation-states to a study of the **"national cultural repertoires"** that underwrite and make possible such discernible differences (p. 9). While they recognize that processes of globalization have to a large extent encouraged a convergence of these cultural repertoires (often glossed as "Americanization"), they maintain that there has likewise been a concomitant retrenchment into national cultural idioms that continue to privilege market performance and moral purity as criteria of evaluation in the United States, versus the salience of rhetoric of civic solidarity and equality in France (see pp. 56–57) (Eskes and Vieira 2016).

**CHAPTER FOUR -METHODOLOGY, POSITIONALITY, AND IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS TO FRAME THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS-** I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews in order to answer the second question of this dissertation. **Research Question Number Two: Does the SES categorization system serve as symbolic boundaries that are reinforcing the hierarchy and exclusionary patterns of the country?**

These interviews are analyzed in Chapter Five. In the **First Section** of Chapter Four, I discuss my positionality, subjectivity, and reflexivity as a researcher. In **Section Two**, I provide the theory of Critical Relativism from which I seek to appreciate the interpretations of social dynamics provided by the respondents. In **Section Three**, I share the methodology of conducting the semi-structured interviews, the methodology of analyzing data, and close with strengths and weaknesses of the methods used.

**CHAPTER FIVE - THE SES AS SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES, A QUALITATIVE STUDY-** Although the focus for this chapter is to answer the second dissertation question, it is inevitable for the first question not to be answered in the process. **Research Question Number One asks**: **How has the SES categorization system transformed substantively from a housing label into a class marker of the identity of an individual?** As participants answer questions about the SES, they demonstrate that the SES has been transformed into an identity marker for individuals. Participants time and time again refer to people as being the ones who have a stratum. This was evidenced in 100 percent of the interviews. **Research Question Number Two asks: How does the SES categorization system serve as symbolic boundaries that are reinforcing the hierarchy**

**and exclusionary patterns of the country?** In order to answer this question, I used the framework from Chapter Four which outlines the three central repertoires that help define class in Colombia. These elements serve as cultural repertoires from which society can draw boundaries. These elements are: 1) the Regional Myth of Belonging, 2) Transnational Repertoires, and 3) the Cultural Myth of Belonging. Below is a diagram which outlines the organization of this chapter.

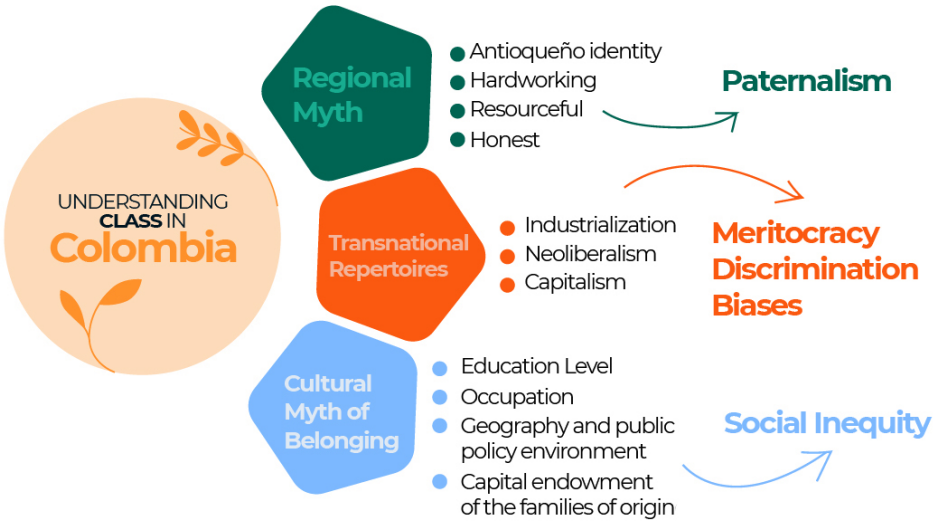



*Figure 8 (González Díez 2021)*

**Section One** examines how the narrative of the regional myth of the *Antioqueño* overlaps with the SES. Furthermore, it discusses how the SES reinforces aspects of the regional myth. Within this narrative, the focus will be on paternalism. How does paternalism show up in the context of the SES and what are the implications of it?

**Section Two** examines the three transnational repertoires central to this dissertation: industrialization, neoliberalism, and capitalism. These repertoires were discussed at length in Chapter Three. In this section they are highlighted using examples that have

come out of the semi-structured interviews. The section will explore how the themes intersect with the SES by using real life examples of how they appear and are understood by Colombians. Additionally, I will explore the significance of these findings by understanding how the SES and the three transnational repertoires intersect and reinforce symbolic boundaries. What they have in common is the systemic issues that they reinforce and that align with the SES. The systemic issues of focus for this section include meritocracy, discrimination, and biases.

**Section Three** examines the cultural myth of belonging, focusing on the four most prominent cultural repertoires in Colombia which include: 1) education level and quality, 2) family environment (economic, social & cultural capital), 3) occupation and income, and 4) policy framework and geographic differences. These four repertoires serve as symbolic boundaries that also influence the conceptualization of the SES.

Finally, I offer a **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS-** This section closes the dissertation by offering future recommendations to advance this work.

## CHAPTER ONE:

## OVERVIEW OF HOW AND WHY THE SES CAME ABOUT, AS WELL AS SOME UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

> Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.
>
> -C. Wright Mills

The SES in Colombia is an official classification mechanism used by the government to determine eligibility for subsidies on a sliding scale based on conditions of the dwelling and access to infrastructure. This system classifies housing in up to six categories depending on the household features, surrounding area, and urban context. In 1968, the *Junta Nacional de Tarifas* (JNT), what was then a government institution in charge of determining public utility rates, defined the parameters of what it considered to be basic consumption levels to subsidize such consumption at a higher rate. However, by 1984 the housing appraisal method was substituted by the SES headed by the Department of National Statistics ("Stratification and Public Utility Services in Colombia: Subsidies to Households or Distortion of Housing Prices?" 2015, 4). Per the *Departamento Nacional de Planeación*-DNP[12], the SES was first introduced as a response to social dissatisfaction with the distribution of residential public utilities. There were complains about corruption, insufficient coverage, inefficiency in the services provided, and losses in the economic model in public utilities. The SES first appeared in the Constitution of 1991 based on the criteria of "solidarity, self-financing, redistribution,

[12] National Planning Department

and of course, social and economic efficiency." ("Stratification and Public Utility Services in Colombia: Subsidies to Households or Distortion of Housing Prices?" 2015, 5).

As part of a neoliberal project, the government of César Gaviria introduced the Constitution of 1991. The new model sought to sell most public utility companies to private international investors. The rationale was to improve the aforementioned grievances that the system was facing. However, the issues were not improved as expected, and instead serious problematics arose that impacted the collective patrimony of the state as well as individual users. Issues that affected the patrimony of the state include: 1) There was corruption in the way these utility service companies were sold. The earnings from such sales were misallocated. 2) Some of the profits from the sales themselves went back into the hands of the private investors to "improve" said services offered to the citizens of Colombia. 3) Colombia was indebted by about $5 million dollars, which was the cost of building and administering utility infrastructure. After the privatization of utility companies, the debt remained with the state. 4) Private utility companies fired and restructured their departments causing a wave of unemployment and giving priority to foreign labor (Gutierrez 2010). Issues that affect individual users include: 1) people who live in lower strata spend a bigger portion of their salaries on utilities. Oftentimes, they have to sacrifice other physiological needs in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs such as food and proper clothing in order to pay their utility bills. 2) Access to utilities. One telling example is that as of 2010 about 2% of the urban population and 44% of the rural population in Colombia does not have access to

potable water. 3) The quality of utility services is subpar in the lower strata (Gutierrez 2010).

> The era of neoliberalism is often defined as a set of changes in economic policy and in economic relationships, many of which created new challenges and insecurities for individuals. But it also reshaped the structure of social relationships, including relationships in the family, workplace, neighborhood, and civil society. It may even have reshaped people's subjectivities- their sense of self, their sense of agency, and their identities and solidarities (Brown 2003)- (Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont 2013:99)

Overtime, this neoliberal agenda continues to be upheld and to have consequences on Colombian citizens. It affects Colombian citizens in more than one way. Not only did the government sell its public utility companies to the private sector by incurring significant national debt in the early 90s. The government continues to tax its citizens to settle that outstanding debt. When President Juan Manuel Santos was running for office in 2008, long after there was evidence of the detrimental consequences of this approach, he was asked about his views of the referendum on potable water. His answer not only reflects how much he champions neoliberal reform and privatization, but also how a new narrative was created in the Colombian imaginary which transforms the notion of private companies from benefitting themselves into the idea that they are present for the benefit of the collective. He stated, "It is necessary to reconsider the content of the water referendum so that there is explicit responsibility of the state for the care of water. At the same time, it needs to be defined that offering utilities for the public is the sole responsibility of private utility companies. Law 142 is the patrimony of all Colombian people" (Gutierrez 2010).

The current deficit that Colombia endures due to modernization in the early 20th century and the different neoliberal projects that followed in late 80s and 90s presents a multiplicity of issues that further inhibit the wellbeing of the most vulnerable populations. Iván Duque Márquez, Colombia's current president, has embarked on a comprehensive project to pay off the country's debt. He has enacted an 18 to 20% tax on the basic goods basket in 2019 and 2020. This is doubly detrimental to the elder population who at the time of retirement, after paying taxes all of their working lives, will have to pay these steep taxes on basic goods. Duque aims to raise about $4,500 million dollars which is the equivalent of $14 billion pesos with this policy alone. Duque claims that he will re-invest 2.6 billion pesos into strata 1 and 2 without offering any details as to how this would be done (Santana Rodriguez 2018). As the economist Eduardo Sarmiento Palacio points out, Duque has also decreased taxes on big corporations from 37% to 30%. This represents a difference of $10 billion pesos (Santana Rodriguez 2018). In other words, Duque is transferring the economic burden of national debt from corporations to the most vulnerable populations in the country, further exacerbating inequity and injustice. These policies are taking place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Needs are so prevalent in the country that people have taken to displaying red flags outside of their households to signal that they are in desperate need of resources. This has become a universal sign of hunger in Colombia, and it is seen in all corners of the country.

*Figure 9 (Maya 2020)*

The concept of privatizing facilities while maintaining the national debt is not an aberration when looking at trends globally. According to Walks (2010), “the entire globalized and neoliberalized economy has evolved into a giant ponzi system, in that flows of new investment are increasingly not used for technological innovation and new production facilities, but to pay off earlier speculators.” Neoliberalism fosters a system where the private sector is bailed out by the state. The governments are the borrowers who pay for the losses with taxpayers’ revenue. The response of nation-states to the global financial crisis was to use “public policy to resuscitate this system, and in doing so, are reproducing highly contradictory and unsustainable, but self-reinforcing, dynamics that imperil future social and economic sustainability.” (Walks 2010:54) (Dunn 2009:199)

By 1994, Law 142 assigned the Departamento Nacional de Planeación the task of designing a methodology to classify households by strata.

> The director of *Departamento Administrativo de Planeación Distrital*[13] (DAPD), Alberto Villate París, stated that the basic function of the stratification is that of grouping the population based on similar social and economic characteristics. (El Tiempo 1996)[14]

Previously, the state distributed subsidies to private utility companies, which in turn uniformly lowered the cost of utilities. After the implementation of the SES, the state directly subsidized the minimum subsistence figure of utilities for housing categorized as strata one, two, and three in order to guarantee access to those who need it the most (Parada Avila et al. 2004). The rates of the subsidies varies depending on the stratum, with stratum one receiving the highest subsidies and stratum three the lowest. Housing categorized as stratum four is considered to host middle-income residents, who are thus are charged market rates for their utilities. Finally, housing that has been ranked as strata five and six are considered to host the wealthier portions of the population, who are thus are charged an inflated price for utilities that in theory should contribute to the financing of subsidies for the poor. The inflated prices of utilities in stratum five are lower than the inflated prices of utilities in stratum six.

The introduction and implementation of the SES has been a long and irregular process (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 143). Using the DNP methodology and guidelines, mayors of each city are responsible for implementing the strata categorization system in their municipalities. The given label of stratum should be enforced for five years, at which point it is up for revision (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 154). There are five important

[13] Administrative Department of District Planning
[14] Translated by author

rules by which each municipality needs to abide to begin the labeling process: 1) only residential housing can be stratified; 2) location needs to be accounted for, as there should be different criteria for urban vs. rural and highly vs. sparsely populated; 3) the methodology used to establish strata has to conform to the national order of DNP; 4) a given household can only be assigned one stratum; and 5) the designation of a stratum is obligatory and must be followed by utility providers and other public goods suppliers (Uribe-Mallarino 2008). Once a given municipality is ready to begin the labeling process, the following characteristics must be considered: 1) household features: the size of the front yard, type of garage, diversity of the façade, and type of roofing; 2) factors of the surrounding areas: types of roads, and types of sidewalks; 3) urban context: location of household (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 154). Each district or municipality can determine the stratum between either *manzanas* or individual residences. For example, in the case of Bogotá, D.C., the assignment of stratum is determined by *manzana*; meaning that in a given *manzana* every household would have the same stratum. Other municipalities or districts may choose the alternative measuring unit of a street or an individual household. If households do not fit the homogeneous characteristics within their measuring unit, it is expected that they will be assessed individually. Regardless of the measuring unit, municipalities and districts are responsible for revising assigned strata if residents or groups of residents make the request (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 154).

The SES is not, however, as predictable and uniform as it may initially appear. Although it was first introduced in the 1991 Constitution, it took years before different municipalities could use the DNP methodology to assess household strata and then

implement the new system with its corresponding rates and subsidies. In the case of Bogotá, D.C., the process did not begin until August of 1995 and was not finally launched until August of 1997. Once the stratum of each *manzana* in Bogotá, D.C. was determined, it was included in household invoices for water, sewage, and garbage collection (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 155). Through subsequent revisions, subsidies were extended to electricity and telephone services (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 17).

It is imperative to note that, while it is implied that the system uses housing characteristics to determine the economic status of tenants, it never considers permanent income of tenants. In other words, the SES does not assess the income of tenants but rather housing characteristics as a way to determine the economic status of the tenants in an effort to accurately target a segment of the population to whom subsidies are provided. As a result, the SES becomes a subjective system relative to income-based models that lends itself more easily to manipulation. This is important to understand given that the SES includes the word "socioeconomic" in its name, and thus it is prone to mislead individuals who understandably assume that this governmental measurement assesses income level and thus socioeconomic status of the individual.

The first city in Colombia that implemented the SES was Bogotá, D.C. Similar structural changes eventually began in 70 big cities, 700 medium cities and big towns, and 300 townships in the country (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 154). Currently, the system can be found in most urban places but has not reached all rural dwellings (Ibid., 154).

Although the SES was implemented as a targeting mechanism to provide subsidies to the poor and to collect data on socioeconomic subgroups, other

governmental and non-governmental entities also use the system for their own interests for classification purposes to operationalize activities such as the adjustment of tax rates and university tuition fees. This targeting strategy has also been used to measure population poverty and welfare, particularly through the System of Beneficiaries Selection (SISBEN). SISBEN is the national system of identification for social subsidies that uses household stratum among permanent income and other indicators to compute their scoring system. SISBEN spends two percent of the national GDP annually on healthcare, while the SES spends approximately 0.7 percent of GDP, 0.3 percent of which comes out of the GDP budget and 0.4% from households living in strata five and six as well as the commercial and industrial sector ("Stratification and Public Utility Services in Colombia: Subsidies to Households or Distortion of Housing Prices?" 2015, 2, 34). Some scholars argue that SISBEN is a more accurate way of measuring poverty than the SES given that income of individuals is taken into consideration.

Colombia is not the only Latin American country to use cross-subsidies to deliver affordable domiciliary public utility services to low-income populations while charging higher income populations inflated rates to contribute to the subsidies of the poor ("Stratification and Public Utility Services in Colombia: Subsidies to Households or Distortion of Housing Prices?" 2015, 5). According to a 2005 World Bank report, there are more than ten countries in the region that have geographically-based targeting mechanisms (ADERASA Grupo Regional de Trabajo Tarifas y Subsidios 2005). While there is a consensus on the relevance of subsidizing the poor, these policies are focused on

improving the targeting system and minimizing the inadequacies ("Stratification and Public Utility Services in Colombia: Subsidies to Households or Distortion of Housing Prices?" 2015, 35). What is unique to Colombia is the way this system has been adopted by its citizens as a hierarchical classification tool. This societal phenomenon can be observed through the articles analyzed in the next chapter.

In sum, Chapter One provides an overview of how and why the SES was introduced as well as some of the direct and unintended consequences. The explanation of why the SES was introduced poses a contradiction given that the issues that were identified as the reasons to introduce the SES were not solved and rather were exacerbated. The SES was introduced because there was dissatisfaction with the distribution of public utilities. Currently, the system can be found in most urban places but has not reached all rural dwellings (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 154).

The categorization of housing based on characteristics of the household features and surrounding areas came about through a neoliberal agenda. César Gaviria became president in 1990 and began his neoliberal campaign which proved to bring about some of the deepest reforms of the 20th Century. With his famous slogan "Bienvenidos al Futuro"[15] he said goodbye to the protectionist economic model and opened the internationalization of the economy. The neoliberal agenda continues to be upheld to this day. The consequences of neoliberalism disproportionally impact those who are disenfranchised and stigmatized in Colombian society. One way in which this can be

[15] "Welcome to the future"

observed is through the transfer of national debt from corporations to the people via inequitable taxation systems. Despite the neoliberal nature of the SES, the government has been able to uphold narratives of solidarity, self-financing, redistribution, and social and economic efficiency.

The paternalistic narrative that has been built around the SES is not the only problematic aspect of the system. There are negative consequences that can be observed at both the state and the individual level. The outcomes of the SES at the state level include: 1) corruption in the privatization process, 2) profits transferred to private investors and not the state, 3) Colombia becoming internationally indebted, 4) private utility companies fired and restructured their departments causing a wave of unemployment. The outcomes of the SES at the user level include: 1) people in lower SES spend a higher percentage of their income on utilities, 2) people in lower SES have a disadvantage as there are issues with access as well as the quality of the utilities provided. In addition to the official use of the SES for utility subsidy distribution and its consequences, other governmental and non-governmental entities also use the system for classification purposes to operationalize activities such as the adjustment of tax rates and university tuition fees.

The negative consequences that have been observed in previous studies are not the only ones that should be considered. Chapter Two will answer the following research question:

**How has the SES categorization system transformed substantively from being a housing label to an identity-shaping tool used on individuals?** By understanding how

this shift has shown up in scholarly work and policy publications, one can begin to understand unintended consequences of a system based on the way it has been adopted by its people.

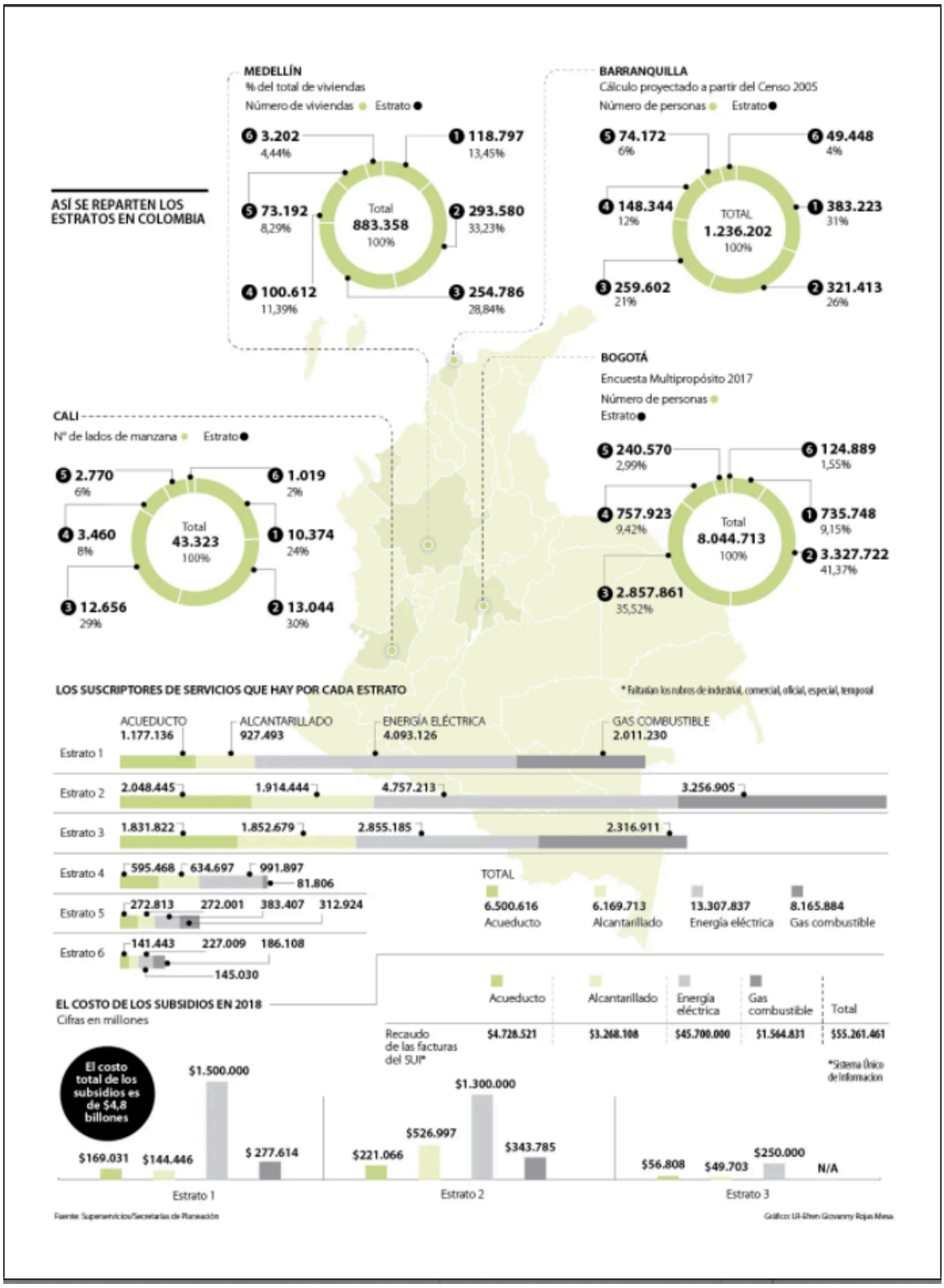



*Figure 10 (El Colombiano 2019)*

# CHAPTER TWO

## THE USE OF THE SES IN COLOMBIA BY SCHOLARS: METHODOLOGICAL FLAWS AND REINFORCEMENT OF SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

> The recondite element in learning is still, as it has been in all ages, a very attractive and effective element for the purpose of impressing, or even imposing upon, the unlearned. -Thorstein Veblen

The purpose of this chapter is to explore **how the SES categorization system has transformed substantively from being a housing label to an identity-shaping tool used on individuals.** It will analyze the way scholars and policymakers have used the SES in their own research. This is particularly relevant as these epistemic communities influence the average person and the collective imaginary of class.

Chapter Two will explore the above research question and will demonstrate that indeed the SES has been transformed into a discrete set of categories to define individuals. Instead of using the SES as a measuring tool with the unit of analysis being the dwelling, 33% of scholars use individual people living in said dwellings as the unit of analysis. This mistake, oversight, or disregard for what the SES was intended to measure offers an important window into a greater societal tendency. Regardless of the reason, this phenomenon is happening at significant rates. This shift to using the SES as an identity-shaping tool is happening swiftly. It is an easy number to remember and to then apply to individuals.

I chose to study the way scholars use the SES as an identity-shaping tool given their impact on society. Peer-reviewed articles, official governmental reports, and reports published by international bodies like the Interamerican Development Bank and the Organization of American States are highly respected and accepted in society. This acceptance is rooted in white supremacy and the narrative of who possesses the truth. The ivory tower of higher/formal education is a space that develops scholars and trains them within the confines of limited narratives that perpetuate hegemonic systems of oppression, knowingly or not.

> Most oppression does not seem like oppression to the perpetrator (Lawrence, 1987). The dominant group of society justifies its power with stock stories, these stories construct reality in ways to legitimize privilege. Stories by people of color can counter the stories of the oppressor. (Tate 1994:249).

By classifying people using the SES, scholars are placing significant labels on people. Given the many systemic roadblocks, the majority of scholars and policymakers are relatively affluent and benefit from having predominant identities in Colombian society. Overtime there has been a slow and steady increase in representation in these spaces from subaltern identities. Leonardo Reales Jiménez shares his experience being one of the only Afro-Colombians in one of the most prestigious research universities in Colombia:

> In 1995 I was the student with the darkest skin color at the University of the Andes, one of the most influential academic institutions in Colombia. I was the only Afro-indigenous person out of more than ten thousand students. Some colleagues called me “the Negro of the university” and made jokes about my indigenous background. I did not know how to respond to their racist verbal attacks. My ethnic identity did not exist at the time, and for many reasons I was confused about my weak racial (“skin-color”) identity. (Reales Jimenez 2012:113)

When privileged scholars adopt the SES label to identify individuals, they may not recognize the problematic nature of this action given their own socioeconomic standing. If they consider this from their own lived experiences, it may feel comfortable to identify with being at the top or towards the top of this ranking system. If there was true representation in academia and policymaking, these kinds of labels may not have been created and transferred to the identity of individuals. In order to avoid these kinds of issues, it is imperative to strive for access to spaces like academia.

> People of color have common experiential knowledge that is gleamed by racism and oppression. However, to solve the problems of specific groups and individuals, their voices must be heard. Their voices represent important knowledge. (Tate 1994:263)

There should be representation not only in terms of race, but also sexual orientation, gender, age, ability, religion, legal status, among other identities. This is important not only because it can help avoid policies that are discriminatory and that hurt everyone in society but also because that is what is needed to foster sense of belonging and wellbeing for all. Notice for example how Leonardo Reales Jiménez felt after having access to a community of people who embraced his ethnicity and heritage:

> In the late 1990s I joined the Afro-Colombian National Movement CIMARRON. While volunteering at CIMARRON, my Afro-Colombian (ethnic) identity grew significantly stronger. In 2001, after supporting local and national campaigns promoting affirmative-action policies for Afro-Colombians, I became the teacher of the "identity and political participation" workshop at the Afro-Colombian National School 'Nelson Mandela's' training program on Afro-Colombian leadership, human rights, and social development. My shift from a weak "racial" identity to a strong ethnic identity was evident, and it did not take much time for me to be engaged in supporting the creation of a sociopolitical movement based on the Afro-Colombian ethnic identity discourse.

> Many Afro-Colombian leaders have gone through similar (personal) experiences while acquiring and defending the so-called Afro-Colombian ethnic identity. (Reales Jimenez 2012:113)

The space that Dr. Reales Jiménez was able to find, was one that embraced his lived experiences as well as his heritage. This is what it takes for spaces to foster authentic sense of belonging and nurture the future scholars who need to be present at the table where new knowledge is being created and fed to the masses. In order to build spaces of belonging, there needs to be representation in the knowledge creation, in the scholarly and policymaker spaces.

Chapter Two will be organized as follows: In **Section One**, I analyze peer-reviewed articles that incorporate the SES in Colombia in their work to assess if authors are using this categorization system in a manner consistent with its original purpose. To this end, and first, this section will describe and evaluate how the system has been used by scholars. Finally, it will discuss the implications of the results and provide some future recommendations.

The result of the following analysis will be to suggest that many scholars use the SES in a way different than intended. This implies that either some authors do not fully understand the SES or that they unfittingly apply it in their own research for lack of a more accurate measuring tool for socioeconomic status. This chapter does not place fault for the misinterpretation of the SES on scholars. It does, however, highlight how scholars are producing a physical record of a trend perceived in Colombian society. The SES was intended to be a classification system of housing for purposes of utility infrastructure resource distribution and was not intended to categorize the individuals

living in each dwelling. Colombian society is transforming the stratum that is designated by the government to a given dwelling into a class identification of the individual living in such dwelling. Thus, many scholars are participating in a national tendency to reinforce differences among citizens instead of minimizing them, which, theoretically, is the purpose of a system created to subsidize some costs associated with housing. In conclusion, these findings point to methodological flaws in the research of those who misuse the SES as well as point to a shift in identity and social interactions of Colombians caused by the SES.

In order to understand the implication of scholars using the SES in this way. It is helpful to root the findings in cultural sociology. Theorists in this discipline show that when a narrow definition of worth or cultural membership becomes dominant or hegemonic, this leads to hierarchical stratification and stigmatization. Scholars and policymakers are reinforcing the SES by using the government's criteria to stratify society and lump together different definitions/understanding of each category. These broad categories implicitly are understood as a marker of social class categorization alongside other symbolic boundaries such as education level, occupation, and income level. Knowledge producers are contributing to the stigmatization of those living in lower strata. Neo-institutional theorists point out that individuals don't show boundaries exclusively out of their own experiences. "They borrow from the general cultural repertoires supplied to them by the society in which they live, relying on general definitions of value traits that take on a rule like status" (Lamont 1992:7). The social contribution of scholars and policymakers is to shape how people understand reality.

They do this in concert with other cultural intermediaries like media experts and lawyers (Michele Lamont 2018).

**Section Two** considers publications that use the SES as a classification tool for identifying socioeconomic status but does not include papers that have the SES as the main topic of analysis. I deemed it important to exclude such papers, given that they would skew the results. I predicted that this would happen, and my predictions were confirmed as shown in **Section Three**. The logic behind this calculation was that if scholars were directly criticizing the system, they most likely had a clear understanding of what the SES was measuring. The focus of section Two is to discover if scholars understand and apply the SES classification system accurately. It will aim to answer the following questions: how do scholars understand and use the SES classification system? Also, what are some ways in which the SES is used incorrectly and what are some ways in which the SES is used correctly? 3) Section Three will include a survey of the articles that explore the SES as their main topic. It will answer the following questions: what methodology are they using, what are their main concerns, how do they understand and use the SES classification system? This section will explain how the system is explored by scholars and how it compares in methodology and accuracy of the use of the classification system in relation to other articles that use this system for other academic ends. **Section Four** of the analysis discusses some of the repercussions of scholars using the SES inaccurately as tool for their own research. This chapter concludes that scholars use the SES in a way different than the one it was intended for; scholars are contributing to the transformation of the SES into a personal categorization system rather than one

that classifies housing. This transformation appears to reinforce differences among citizens rather than minimize them, which alters social interactions as well as peoples' identities. Lastly, these findings point to methodological inconsistencies of those who misuse the SES in their research.

## SECTION ONE

### METHODOLOGY

This study is based on an evaluation of 49 peer-reviewed articles and three academic reports (n=52). This number reflects all the articles I had access to on the Tulane database when performing the search. The study provides a qualitative analysis of the content of each article taking into consideration language, methodology, year published, region of Colombia studied, discipline, topic, and whether it uses the SES consistent with its original criteria. I referenced the Tulane University Library database between October 2015 and November 2016 to search for peer-reviewed articles in Spanish and English that mentioned the term "Colombia" in addition to one of the following terms: "estratos," "estrato," "socioeconomic@," "strata," "stratum," "socioeconomic." Only articles that were available in full-text online were selected and from that selection a matrix of content was created for the purposes of comparison and analysis. I chose the Tulane University database as the platform to conduct this study given its vast reach of Latin American journals as well as U.S. journals in topics pertaining Latin America. One limitation of using this database is the lack of access to other journal articles that are not included in the database. However, this database

belongs to the second largest Latin American library in the United States and thus should have a comprehensive reach to the inquired articles.

Of the 52 articles and reports returned by the search, seven take the SES as their main focus. The remaining articles make reference to the categories of the strata system only as a means of investigating some other topic.

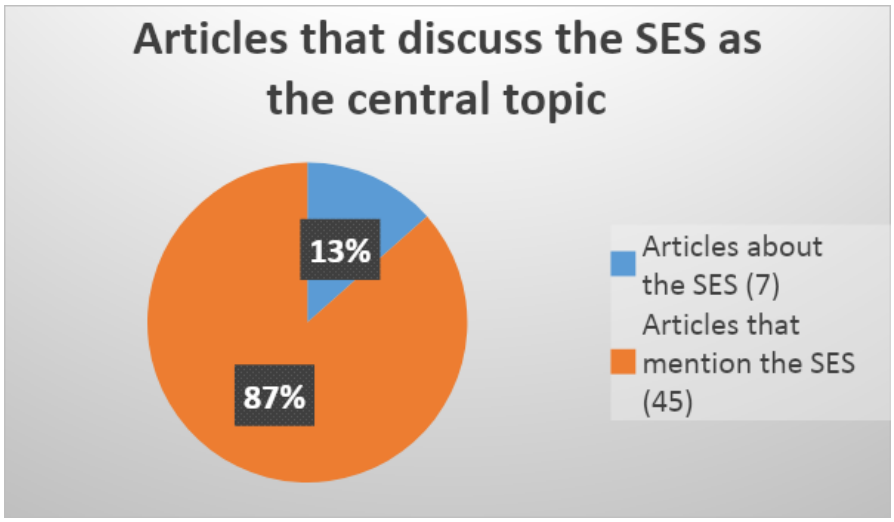



*Figure 11*

Based on the observations above, it is evident that there is more interest in using the SES as a research tool rather than investigating the impact of the SES as a subsidy program. All seven of the articles that discussed the SES as a central topic are written from a social science perspective; four are from economics, two from political science, and one from urban studies. It is understandable that all the "articles about the SES" come from the social science disciplines given the nature of the classification system and its direct effect on politics, urban planning, and the Colombian economy. In addition, some articles within these fields cover topics that consider urban segregation and social and spatial mobility. However, it is surprising that there are no articles that

come from disciplines like sociology, psychology, or other fields that question the social impact that this system may have on society.

Four of the seven or 57% of the "articles about the SES" are written in Spanish and three in English. The other 87% of the works are "articles that mention the SES." When looking closer at the language distinction between the "articles about the SES," it becomes clear that those written in Spanish were published in local Colombian journals and those written in English were written for an international audience in international journals. Thus, based on this limited number of "articles about the SES" analyzed, it appears that there is more interest in understanding the SES at the local level as opposed to the international level. Furthermore, out of the 38 articles that mention the SES that are written in Spanish or Spanish/English, 53% of them misused the SES. Scholars misuse the SES by applying the categorization label assigned to housing to the individuals living in such housing, a phenomenon that will be explained in detail in the following section. This misuse of the SES may be a sign of a greater societal trend in which the SES has been deeply ingrained in peoples' identities to the point that even scholars who are trained to think critically overlook what the SES is measuring in actuality.

A variety of disciplines is represented among the articles studied, twenty (38%) come from the medicine category; within the "medicine" category depicted below, there are articles on medicine, nursing, nutrition, and dentistry. The second most popular category is the social sciences, with 16 articles from the fields of economics, political science, and psychology. Finally, the third most popular category is public

health, with eight articles. Figure six depicts the number of articles in each of the disciplines represented in the study.

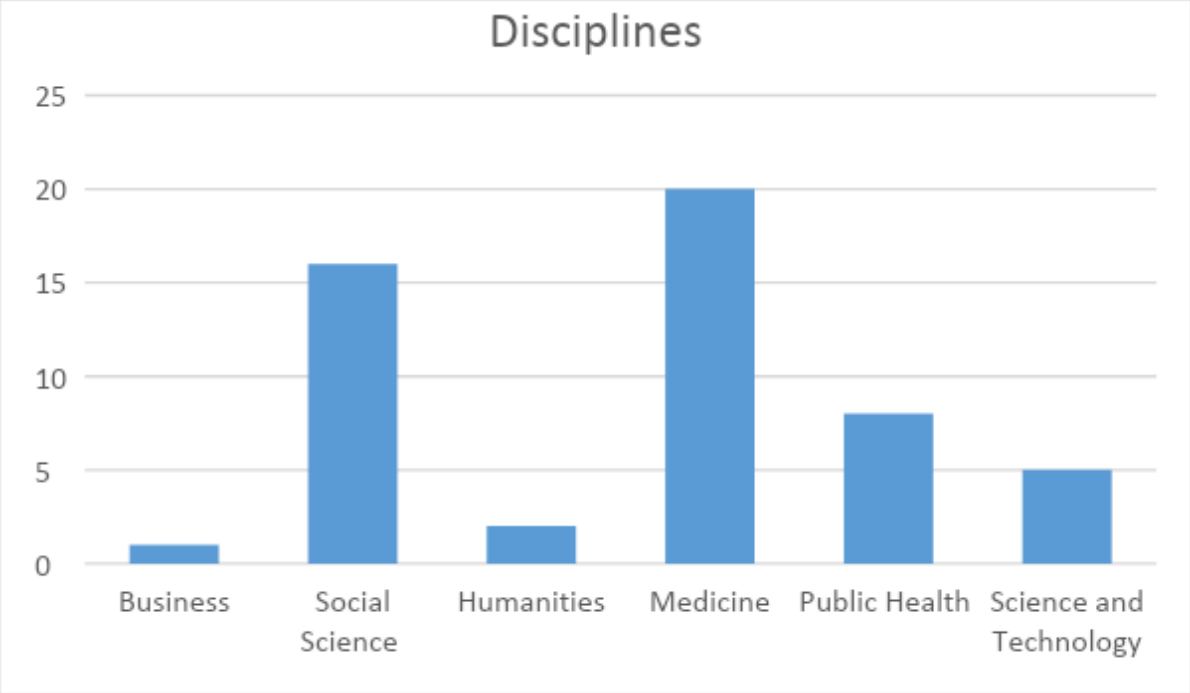



*Figure 12*

Figure 13 shows that out of all the articles analyzed, 20 % are written in English, 77% in Spanish, and the rest include both languages in the publication. These figures are not surprising given that the SES is a classification system most familiar to people living in Colombia, and thus analyzing the system or using it as a measuring tool is more commonly done by Colombians rather than by scholars originating in other places. This analysis is done based on the assumption that the majority of the articles published in Spanish are done by Colombian scholars and that they were published in Colombian journals for a Colombian audience.

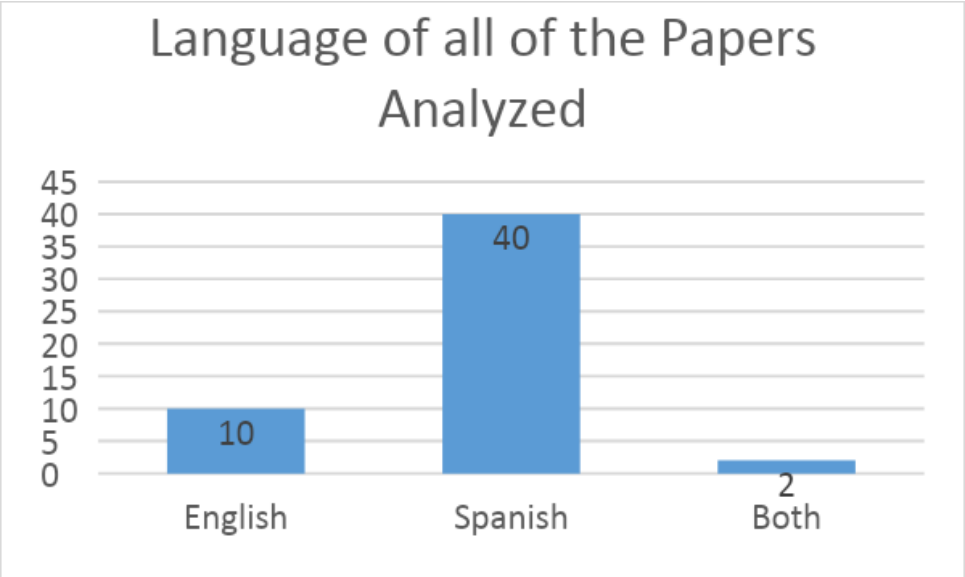



*Figure 13*

Figure 14 shows that when looking only at the 45 "articles that mention the SES," 80% are written in Spanish, 15% in English, and 4% in both languages. These findings are important because they demonstrate the tendency of Colombian scholars to rely on the SES as a measuring tool to apply to their own research. Oftentimes, scholars think they are measuring socioeconomic status of an individual by using the SES of their household despite the fact that the SES does not take into consideration education level, income, or even number of people living in a given dwelling. Again, I assumed that the Spanish-language articles were written by Colombian authors, given that these authors were affiliated with Colombian universities and had published their articles in Colombian journals. This is evidence of a greater societal trend that has transformed the SES from a subsidy mechanism that labels dwellings to the labeling of individuals shifting their identity and misunderstanding that SES does not mean socioeconomic status of the individual.

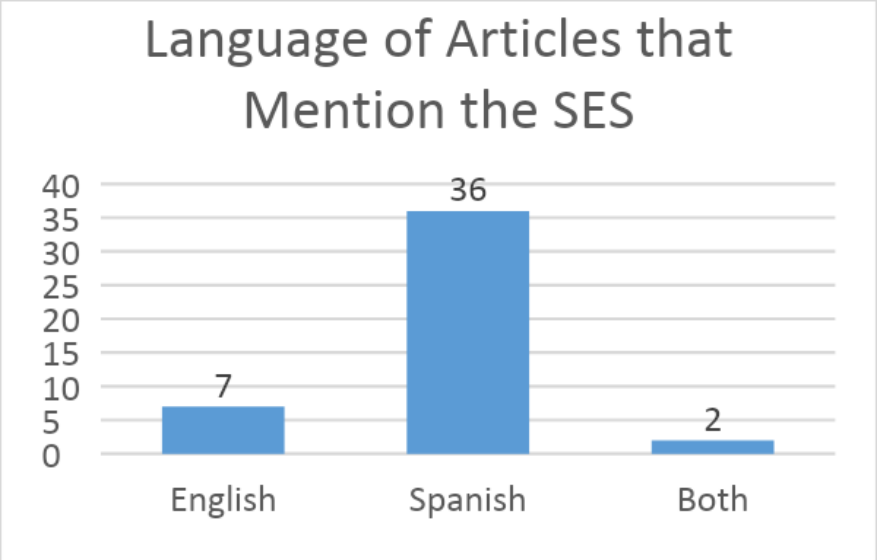



*Figure 14*

Figure 15 below shows that out of the seven "articles about the SES," 42% are written in English and 57% in Spanish. Despite the small sample, it can be inferred that as a subsidy system, the SES has had more international attention. Thus, international scholars are more likely to analyze the system rather than to use the system as a measuring tool. Finally, it is evident that "articles about the SES" are more likely to be written in Spanish than "articles that mention SES," which are more likely to be written in English.

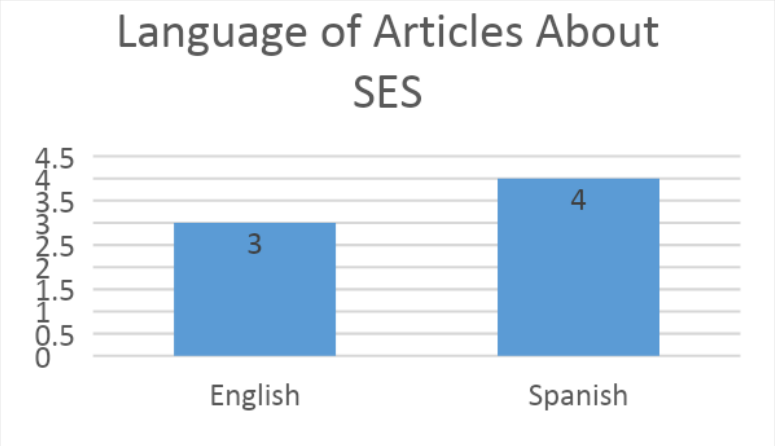



*Figure 15*

Figure 16 shows that the earliest article studied was published in 2001, despite the SES having been introduced in the constitution of 1991. Even though the SES was created at the federal level, the implementation of the system was delegated to the mayor of each city. As such, the SES was introduced to different parts of the country at different times, and it took years before most cities were stratified. To this day there are some rural areas that are not yet stratified. This delay in the implementation of the system explains why the first article in this study was published ten years after its introduction. However, despite the contemporary nature of the SES, the speed at which it became everyday jargon is worth noting. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, everyone who was interviewed, including the participant who was displaced and did not have permanent housing, is familiar with the SES in Colombia. Furthermore, the evidence of Colombian scholars being willing to use the SES as an indicator of socioeconomic status further corroborates its manifestation in the conscience of citizens.

In 2012 there was a spike in the number of publications at 17 articles, or 33%. It may be worth looking closer into this phenomenon as it may be telling of a greater

trend. It is my hope that soon more articles that examine the impact of the SES in Colombian society will be published, as this may ignite policy change.

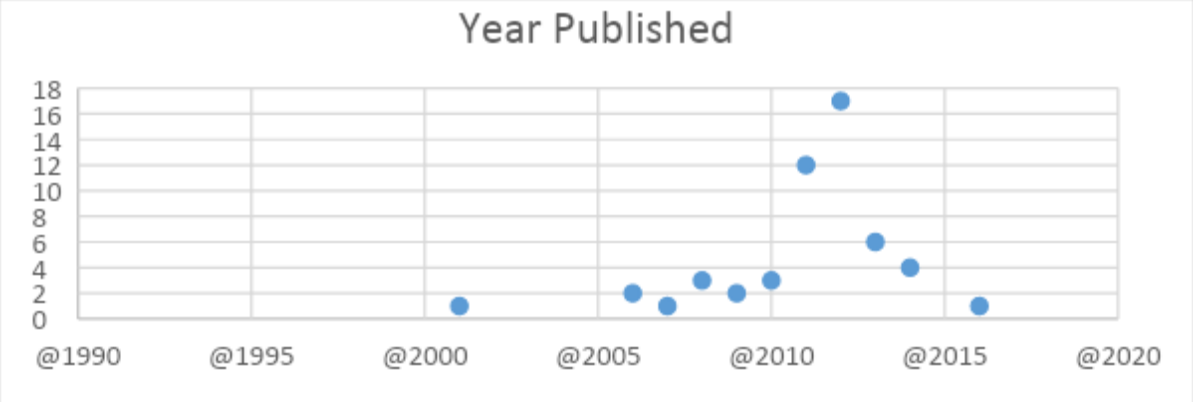



*Figure 16*

Figure 17 depicts the representation of 13 regions of Colombia, in addition to studies that focused on Colombia as a whole. Bogotá, D.C. and Medellín/Coffee Growing Region are the two areas that are discussed the most, each making up 23% of the publications. The category with the third-largest number of publications consists of articles that study Colombia as a whole, which represented 13% of total articles. Given that Bogotá, D.C. is the biggest city and Medellín the third biggest, the number of publications follows a logic based on size. However, following that logic, Cali, which is the second biggest city in Colombia would be underrepresented. One explanation for this aberration could be that Medellín is considered an academic hub and thus it is more prone to host more academics that will be inspired to publish about the city.

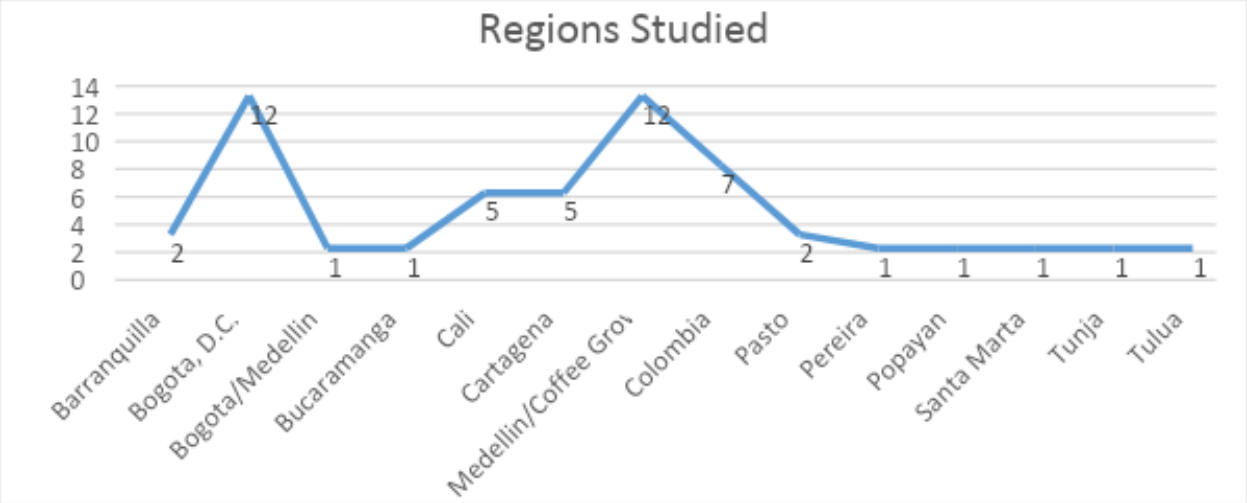



*Figure 17*

Finally, figure 18 shows that in terms of methodology, articles that mention the SES are more likely to include quantitative methods. Seventy-five percent of all articles contained quantitative methodology and another 13% contained both quantitative and qualitative methodology for a total of 88% of all articles.

The Colombian government has invested significant resources including financial and human capital to stratify households. This information is free and open to the public and thus tempting for scholars to use in lieu of their own formula to calculate socioeconomic status. Thus, it comes as no surprise that scholars who use the SES are overwhelmingly applying it to their own research as a quantitative variable. The problem, as indicated throughout this Chapter, is that the SES measures the status of a given household and not the socioeconomic status of an individual. If scholars were explicitly stating what the SES measures, and supplemented with additional information, it would be acceptable to take advantage of the data already provided by the government. However, the articles that were deemed “wrong” in this study used the

SES as a variable for socioeconomic status of the individual. In some cases authors wrongly defined the SES as a measurement for income and education level, and in other cases they did not explicitly define the SES but used it as an indicator of socioeconomic status.

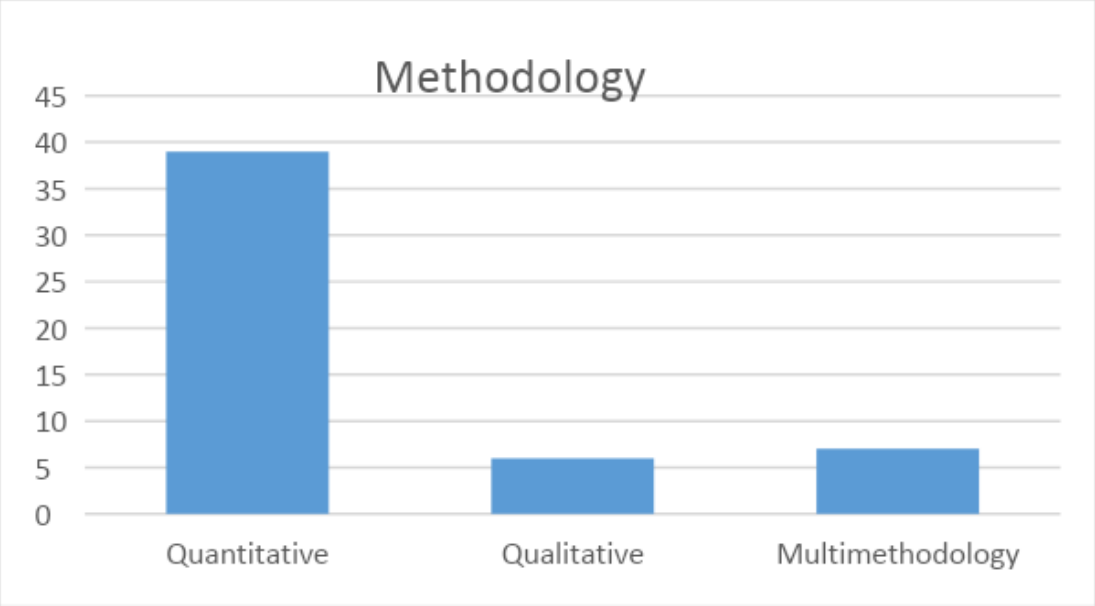



*Figure 18*

The articles that mention the SES in their methodology are important to analyze given that the authors are often misinterpreting the SES, and this may result in methodological flaws. The implications of this can go so far as to suggest that such papers are inaccurate in their findings, as they claim to be measuring something that they are not in fact measuring. This is troubling given the number of papers found making this mistake. Forty-nine of the papers are peer reviewed, and three are reports from well-recognized organizations including the Organization of American States and El

Banco de la República[16]. Thus, the findings in this chapter should be taken seriously as it may affect policy development. Furthermore, it is important to identify these mistakes, as they not only affect the findings of a given paper, but they can also contribute to a divisive societal classification labeling mechanism that is mistakenly bestowed on the individual rather than on their dwelling as it was intended to be.

For purposes of accuracy and validity, the present research sought to generate the largest sample possible by including all the relevant articles found on the Tulane University database. Some of the limitations of this sample include that the Tulane University database may not contain all the possible articles that might fit the objective of this study and, as a result, the findings may not represent the entire body of work that uses the SES for their own research. Furthermore, when analyzing how each scholar understands and interprets the SES, this paper can only base its conclusions on the way scholars describe their research and based on the data that is included on each publication. Thus, this paper can only comment on the understanding of SES of scholars based on the content of the articles.

## SECTION TWO

### ARTICLES THAT MENTION THE SOCIOECONOMIC STRATIFICATION SYSTEM AS PART OF THE CRITERIA FOR ANALYSIS OF OTHER TOPICS

The articles that mention the SES as methodology for their research offered the most troubling findings, as 33% of them are not using the SES in a way consistent with

[16] The Central Bank of Colombia

its original purpose, and another 13% of them are unclear in defining the system and explaining their methodology. This is depicted in figure 20 below:

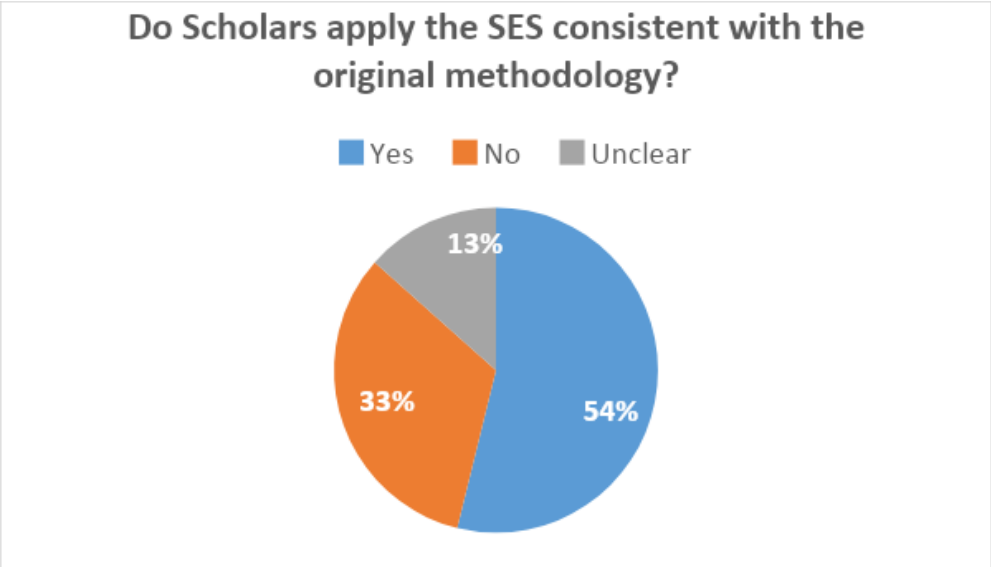



*Figure 19*

However, not all articles misunderstood the SES. As can be observed in figure nine, 54% of articles used the SES categorization correctly, applying it to housing and not to individuals. Some of these articles serve as an example of how to correctly use the SES methodology for research. Forty-seven percent of the articles that misused the SES are about medicine and 29% about public health. Thus 76% of all articles that misunderstood the SES are focused on health. This may suggest that scholars are reaching for a tool in absence of a better one, or that perhaps there is a lack of understanding of the purpose of the SES among health scholars.

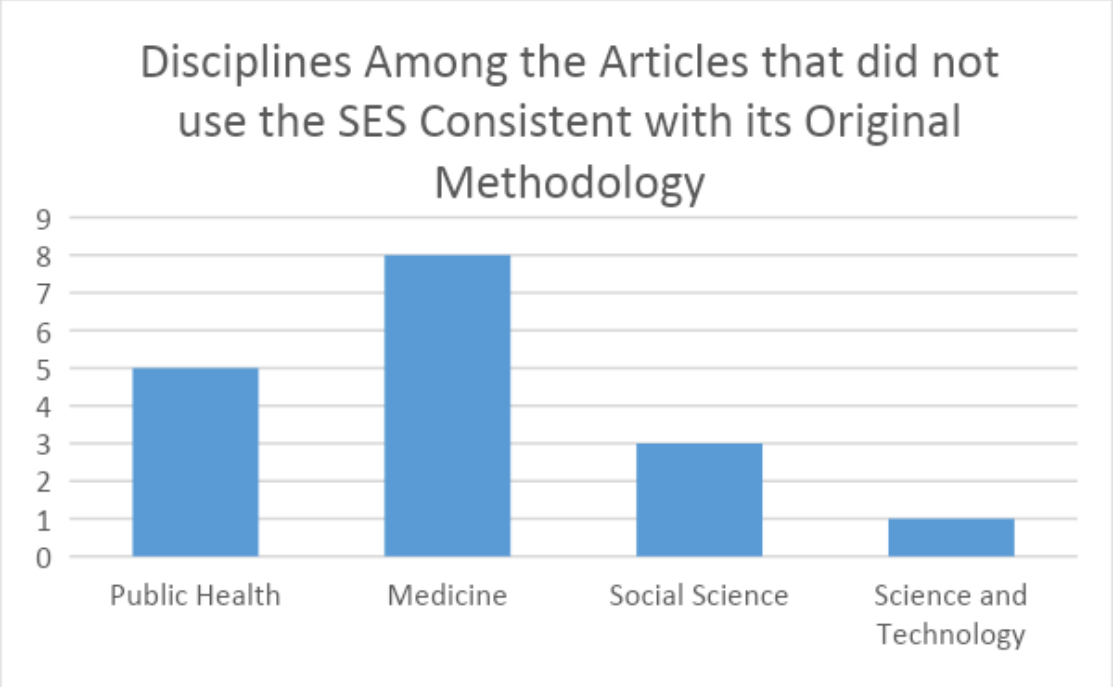



*Figure 20*

It is not surprising that perhaps scholars who do not study the SES may be confused by this governmental labeling system for housing. Without questioning it or without a better methodological tool at hand, scholars are pegging the SES to the individual, thus transforming this subsidy system into a personal demographic category alongside descriptors like gender and age. In a psychology article published by Marly Johana Bahamón Muñetón in 2012 called "Bulimia y estrategias de afrontamiento en adolescentes escolarizadas de la ciudad de Pereira, Colombia" ("Bulimia and strategies of confrontation for educated teenagers in the city of Pereira, Colombia"), Bahamón Muñetón explains the SES in her own words:

> The socioeconomic stratum determines social stratification based on the wages that individuals earn and that it is used to classify housing properties in accordance with the general guidelines of the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadistica (Law 142 of 1994, article 102). In Colombia, there are 6

> legal socioeconomic strata that range from one being the lowest and six being the highest.

This passage reveals that Bahamón Muñetón misunderstands the method used by the government to come up with the SES classification system. She assumes that the system determines stratum of an individual based on income and characteristics of their housing rather than a classification system for housing alone. Thus, when analyzing her subjects, Bahamón Muñetón groups together age, education level, and SES stratum, as if SES stratum were a personal demographic category. As a result, the author is not only transforming the stratum of a person's dwelling into a personal demographic category, but she is also misunderstanding what it means.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the SES classification system does not consider the income of individuals. All of the criteria used to develop this housing label are concerned with characteristics of the dwelling and the surrounding areas. Thus, Bahamón Muñetón is wrongly assuming a reality about her subjects that may not be true. There is no denying that oftentimes housing conditions correspond to a certain level of income, as usually individuals who earn more money are more likely to own a more luxurious home than individuals who earn less money. However, this is not always the case, as individuals who may be considered to have a high economic status may choose to live in a humble dwelling or vice versa. As a result, when the Colombian government is measuring SES, it is only taking into account housing conditions and not income of the dwellers and thus the socioeconomic status of an individual cannot accurately be determined based on such a categorization system.

An excerpt of a semi-structured interview that I conducted in June 2015 is included to provide a more concrete example of the disparity that can be present between where someone lives and their income level. The interviewee, Andres Ochoa, is a human rights advocate who formerly worked for the United Nations but had quit his job to run as a local councilman in Medellín at the time of the interview. His interview demonstrates that the strata given to a household does not always correspond to the expected socioeconomic status of an individual.

> Andres Ochoa: I was born in Medellín, I am from the barrio La Francia, it is an illegal settling community…I am stratum one and my salary before I quit my job was $8,000,000 Colombian pesos ($2,565 US dollars a month). If I move to stratum four, rent could cost $3,000,000 ($962 US dollars a month). It is an imbalance…strata should not exist, only the aid and the subsidies.

Based on his income, Ochoa could have chosen to live in stratum four or five, however, he decided to stay in his childhood neighborhood in a dwelling labeled by the government as stratum one. Furthermore, when looking at the wider definition of socioeconomic stratum, it involves more than someone's income and housing situation; oftentimes, scholars who study socioeconomic indicators consider education level, occupation, and social position. Consequently, even when scholars assume that the SES in Colombia considers income, they are still missing important indicators of socioeconomic status.

In another article called "Violencia de pareja en mujeres de la comunidad, tipos y severidad Cali, Colombia[17]." Burgos, et. al., claim that, in Cali, women of low

[17] "Domestic violence experienced by women in the community, types, and severity, in Cali, Colombia"

socioeconomic stratum experience higher levels of violence compared to women of high socioeconomic stratum. The paper states as follows:

> The women of low socioeconomic status present higher levels of partner violence compared to the women of higher socioeconomic status…150 women were studied between the ages 18 and 75…Women of socioeconomic strata 1, 2, and 3 were predominant with 22%, 32%, and 36% respectively. There was a significant negative correlation between socioeconomic stratum and threats of violence, physical violence, but not with sexual violence. (Delia Burgos et al. 2012, 381).

The problem with the above statement is that when Burgos, et. al., talk about socioeconomic status, they are assuming the wide definition of the term, meaning a person's social and economic standing in Colombian society. However, they do not seem to realize or at least do not make it clear for the reader that the claim that they are making is categorizing people based on the physical dwelling where they live, rather than taking into consideration income level, education, education level of parents, and social standing as perceived by the local community, etc. A more accurate statement that would reflect the findings of the study above might state:

> The women who live in housing with less favorable conditions present a higher level of partner violence compared to the women who live in more favorable conditions such as better infrastructure in the neighborhood, more space in the dwelling, bigger front yard, etc.… 150 women were studied between the ages 18 and 75…Women who lived in dwellings that are labeled by the Colombian government as having poor infrastructure and living conditions were predominant. These households are labeled one, two, three, one being the classification with most precarious conditions with representation of 22%, 32%, 36% of women respectively. There was a significant negative correlation between conditions of a women's dwelling and threats of violence, physical violence, but not with sexual violence.

The new statement clarifies that the findings of the study point to women who live in unfavorable dwellings with conditions considered to have a low SES stratum rather than "women of low socioeconomic status."

However, not all authors misunderstood the classification system as some used the SES to complement their study and others came up with their own formula to calculate socioeconomic status. In her article "Remesas y vulnerabilidad sociodemográfica en hogares de estratos medios-bajos de Cali," [18] María Gertrudis Roa Martínez uses the SES as one of the variables to measure socio-economic characteristics that are predominant in peoples' homes based on remittance spending.

> The objective of the article is to describe the socio-demographic and economic characteristics that are predominant in the households according to the allocation of remittances, such as nutrition, rent, utilities, health, education, leisure and investment, with the purpose of establishing differences between households, in order to have a better understanding about the logic of consumption…The information presented in this article was collected through a non-probability survey of 209 homes that were ranked in stratum 2 and 3 in Cali in the year 2009. The unit of analysis is the home and the selection criteria were the following: to live in a neighborhood that is classified as stratum 2 or 3 in accordance with the classification of utilities in Cali, to receive remittance from Spain in a periodic fashion and to have voluntary agreement from the administrator of allowances to participate in the survey (Martínez 2012, 189).

One of the key aspects that makes this article strong in its methodology is that the unit of analysis is the home and not the individual. Because the author uses SES as a tool in the way that it was intended to be used, the analysis takes advantage of the research that the Colombian government has already done and yields rich answers. Roa

[18] Remittance and sociodemographic vulnerability in homes of mid-low strata in Cali

Martínez uses the SES to identify specific neighborhoods that are expected to have certain characteristics. However, she does not take the SES information as fact and instead she uses her own questionnaire to fact-check some of the information that should be answered by knowing the stratum of a given household. Roa Martinez operationalized socio-demographic characteristics into seven variables, the first of which asks for the average size of the house. Notice that this is a question that scholars can easily assume based on the information provided by the SES, but Roa Medina chooses to verify this information. Figure 22 below displays her chart:

| Dimensión | Propósito | Variable | Definición operativa |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Características socio-demográficas de los hogares** | Describe las condiciones del hogar de acuerdo a los grupos etarios que lo conforman | Tamaño promedio del hogar | Número promedio de personas que comparten la alimentación y tienen un mismo presupuesto en el hogar |
| | | Total de beneficiarios de remesas por hogar | Total de personas que se benefician directamente de la remesa, demostrando el carácter selectivo de la ayuda en el hogar |
| | | Tasa de infancia | Porcentaje del total de menores de 15 años sobre el total de personas del hogar |
| | | Tasa de envejecimiento | Porcentaje del total de adultos mayores de 64 años sobre el total de personas en el hogar |
| | | Tasa de dependencia demográfica | Porcentaje del total de personas dependientes por edad (menores de 15 años y adultos de 65 años en adelante ) sobre el total de personas entre los 15 y los 64 años (en edad productiva) |
| | | Capital educativo del hogar | Promedio de años estudiados en el sistema escolar de todos los miembros mayores de 15 años en el hogar |
| | | Tasa de acceso a la educación superior | Porcentaje de jóvenes entre los 15 y 25 años que están o han alcanzado el nivel técnico-universitario del total de jóvenes de cada hogar |

*Figure 21 (Martínez 2012, 193)*

Other variables that she includes to calculate socioeconomic status of a given dwelling are: number of people per household, percentage of individuals under the age of 15 living in the household, percentage of adults over the age of 64, percentage of total individuals under the age of 15 and adults over 64, aggregate average of years

studied in school, percentage of young people between 15 and 25 that are enrolled or have graduated from at least a technical level of higher education.

**ARTICLES ABOUT THE SOCIOECONOMIC STRATIFICATION SYSTEM IN COLOMBIA**

The focus of this chapter shifts from peer-reviewed articles that use the SES as a socioeconomic indicator for their own research, to articles that directly study different aspects of the SES. Figure 23 shows the disciplines of the seven papers that directly discuss the SES, all of which are social science papers and as mentioned on the methodology section, 57% of which are written in English. This differs from the pattern of papers that use the SES in their methodology, from which only 15% are written in English.

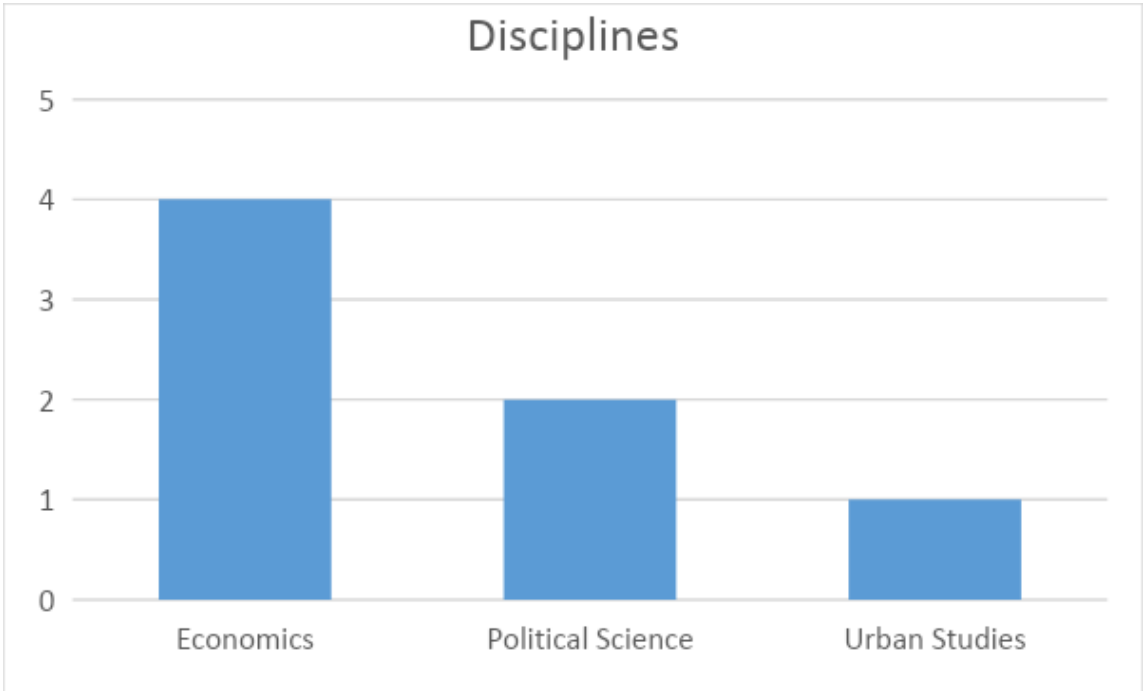



*Figure 22*

Figure 13 shows the different journals represented in the seven papers that critique the SES. The only internationally published paper was written in English and

appeared in the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. Four other papers were published by Colombian university presses, including those of the Universidad de Medellín, Pontifícia Universidad Javeriana, and Universidad del Rosario. Furthermore, two of the seven or 28% percent of the articles are written by Consuelo Uribe-Mallarino, a political science professor at Pontifícia Universidad Javeriana. She was often cited by other scholars and appears to be the expert on this topic in Colombia.

As mentioned in the methodology section, in addition to the total 49 peer-reviewed articles, three reports were also included and out of those three reports, two discuss the SES directly. More interestingly, both of those reports are from El Banco de la República (the Central Bank of Colombia), and they are written in English.

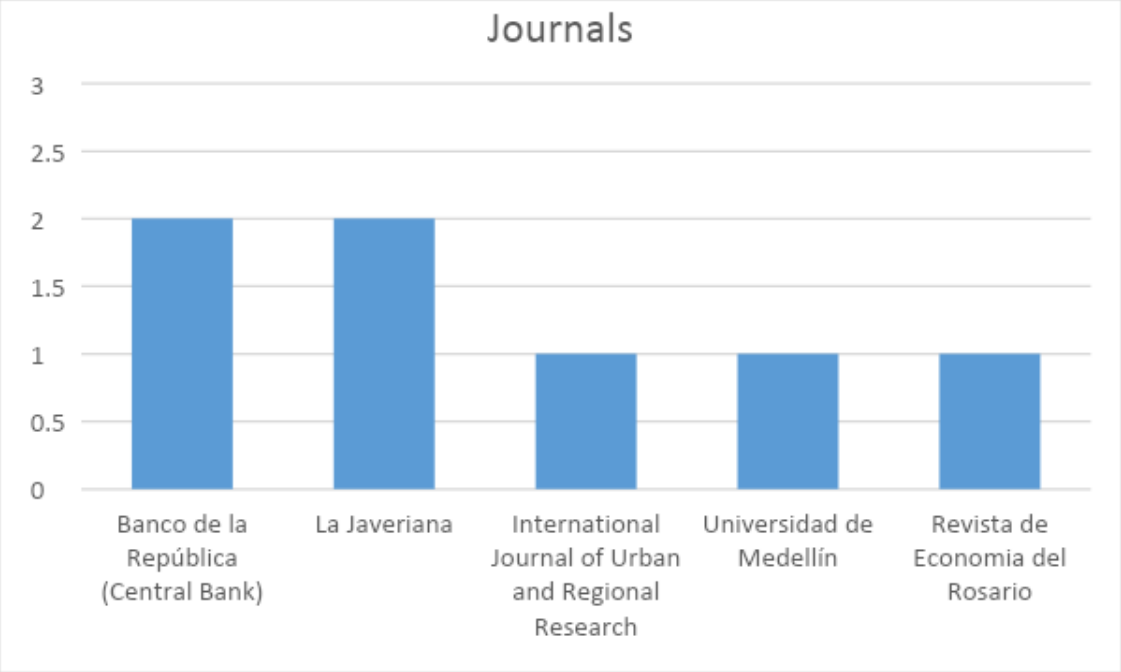



*Figure 23*

The papers critique the SES from different perspectives, but what they all have in common is that they find faults in the system. In "El SISBEN como mecanismo de focalización individual del régimen subsidiado en salud en Colombia: ventajas y limitaciones,"[19] Bottia et al., 2012 analyze the methodology used to determine health coverage for Colombian citizens contrasting the old SISBEN[20] system with the new SISBEN system. What they find is that the new system has improved the identification of beneficiaries and that if the targeting system were to be switched to utilize the SES as a tool for identification instead of the SISBEN, there would be a significant increase in the price of the coverage given the inaccuracy of the SES, which allows "for the inclusion of non-eligible population" (Bottia, Cardona-Sosa, and Medina 2012, 163).

Consuelo Uribe-Mallarino analyzes the SES in terms of social representation, order, and hierarchy and finds that indeed the system deeply interferes with the way people think about social differences (Uribe-Mallarino 2008, 140). In a second paper that she co-authored with Camila Pardo Pérez, the authors examine social mobility through the analysis of spatial mobility as well as social representations by stratum. What they suggest is that most citizens of Bogotá, D.C. desire to stay in the same stratum where they already reside, even when taking away economic limitations. This is based on a survey where respondents indicated that they would stay in their same neighborhood even if they won the lottery. These results, they say, indicate that the SES

[19] "The SISBEN as a targeting mechanism for individualized subsidies in the Colombian healthcare system: the advantages and limitations"
[20] System of Identification and classification of potential beneficiaries for social programs

policies do indeed restrict social mobility, not only because of the prices of housing utilities, but also because of the identity that each individual adopts corresponding to the stratum of their housing (Camila Pardo Pérez and Consuelo Uribe-Mallarino 2006, 200).

In the Banco de la República report, Carlos Medina and Leonardo Morales find that the flow of SES subsidies is discounted by "housing market agents so that most of them are transferred to the prices of the houses that generate the subsidies" (Medina and Morales 2006). In other words, the savings accrued by tenants are then lost in the inflated prices of rent. A second Banco de la República report by the same authors and Jairo Núñez conducts an analysis on Bogotá, D.C. and Medellín to describe spatial segregation; they suggest that it is important to redesign another SES system to be able to continue reaching the poor without deepening segregation (Medina, Morales, and Nuñez 2008).

John Alexander Méndez Sayago and Johanna Mildred Méndez Sayago discuss the minimum subsistence of drinking water for customers who live in strata one and two and assess if it is realistic for strata five and six to be able to subsidize the cost of water for strata one and two. (Part of the design of the SES is to charge an inflated price for utilities to households categorized as strata five and six that in turn would subsidize the price of utilities of households in strata one and two). What they find is that in cities like Neiva, Ibagué, and Cúcuta, the coverage for strata one and two cannot be subsidized by strata five and six due to the ratio of the contributions from strata five and six vs. the

number of beneficiaries in strata one and two. In contrast, cities like Bogotá, D.C., Manizales, Medellín, Cali, Bucaramanga, and Santa Marta, in that order, present higher feasibility (Mendez Sayago and Mendez Sayago 2011, 113).

Finally, Joel Thibert and Giselle Andrea Osorio find that spatial segregation is reinforced by the SES, given that it identifies certain areas of the city as poor, middle-class, or rich. They contextualize their research in comparing Latin American and North American metropoles and point to the lack of political interest in Latin America of the urbanization of suburbs given that suburbs in Latin America are not becoming politically polarized in the way it is happening in North America (Thibert and Osorio 2014, 1337).

## SECTION THREE

## CONCLUSION

> True awareness requires an understanding of the Rules of Racial Standing. As an individual's understanding of these rules increases, there will be more and more instances where one can discern their workings. Using this knowledge, one gains the gift of prophecy about racism, its essence, its goals, even its remedies. The price of this knowledge is the frustration that follows recognition that no amount of public prophecy, no matter its accuracy, can either repeal the Rules of Racial Standing or prevent their operation.
>
> -Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992)

The purpose of this section is not to place blame on scholars but to highlight how scholars are perpetuating and producing physical records of a greater societal trend, a trend that has transformed the SES into a tool for labeling individuals that has become part of Colombian identity. In Chapter Three I will demonstrate that indeed the identity of the average Colombian citizen has been altered by the SES and explore how

*antioqueños* are affected by these labels. Chapter Two revealed that many scholars use the SES in a way different than intended and the two main misunderstandings that surfaced were: 1) the belief that the SES accounts for income of the people living in each household and 2) the assumption that the SES stratum is pegged to the individual rather than their dwelling. Methodologically, these misunderstandings can lead scholars to misinterpret what they are analyzing, which can potentially result in flawed findings. Such discrepancies take away from the credibility and the reliability of the results. Fifty percent of all "articles that mention the SES" analyzed are about: medicine, nursing, nutrition, dentistry, and public health. This is an alarming figure given the critical need for accuracy in such fields. Another 31% of the articles are about economics and political science. Such articles are published in journals including the American Economic Journal, Regional Science and Policy Practices, OAS Proyecto Internacional de la CICAD.[21] These kinds of publications can sometimes result in policy decisions, development strategies, and international loans that have the potential to affect the future of Colombian citizens.

Even though this chapter shows there are methodological flaws that merit a closer look at the way the SES is used in research, there are also exemplary papers that applied the SES correctly and used it as a tool to strengthen their findings. There are two key aspects that made articles particularly strong in their methodology: 1) when they used a unit of analysis at the home and not the individual level and 2) when they

[21] OAS International project of the CICAD

created their own criteria to determine a person's socioeconomic status, including education level, income, and employment, and added the SES as another variable without assuming that it meant socioeconomic status, but rather the housing conditions of a given individual. The above key aspects are important to include while using SES as a research tool given that they ensure that researchers are measuring the right unit of analysis, which is the home and not the individual in order to avoid mistakes, keep consistency, and yield specific results. Furthermore, by coming up with their own criteria to measure socioeconomic status, researchers are accounting for additional variables other than conditions of housing, which is what the SES measures to come up with socioeconomic status. In this way researchers can take advantage of the resources invested in by the Colombian government to measure SES and effectively apply them in their own research given that they understand what is being measured.

There is a difference between scholars that publish in English and those who publish in Spanish. The data suggest that scholars who live in Colombia are more likely to misuse the system in their research. This assumption is made based on the difference in total number of articles written in English and in Spanish and the reoccurrence of the misuse of the SES happening in articles published in Spanish. Of all the articles analyzed, only three written in English are considered to have misunderstood the SES. This is telling, as it suggests that people who encounter the SES in their everyday lives are more likely to misunderstand the system.

This section shines light on other research questions to be answered going forward. When looking at publication dates, there is a spike of publications in 2011 and

2012 with 12 and 17 publications respectively, making up 55% of all publications studied. There is no evident reason for this and therefore it should be analyzed further. In terms of regions where research was conducted, there are two areas with the highest number of cases: Bogotá, D.C. and Medellín/Coffee Growing Region, both with 12 cases each. This may have to do with the fact that those are the two biggest cities in Colombia, and there is thus a wealth of universities, resources, and networks that may attract researchers. Another contributing factor may be that both cities are among the first to have implemented the SES, and there is more data to analyze. However, these are mere suggestions and further research is needed.

Only 13% of the articles analyzed critique the SES. This small percentage points to the need for this topic to be explored further, considering the misunderstandings of the SES that surfaced in this study and the potential consequences. Even though the focus of each article about the SES is different, what they all have in common is that they find fault in the system. Thus, it is imperative to reevaluate the SES as a utility infrastructure resource distribution given its functional flaws and the potential negative impact that this system has on Colombian society. Special attention should be given to the consequences that this labeling mechanism may have in the way Colombian citizens perceive themselves and relate to others. This paper contributes to the broader notion that the SES is having a negative impact on the hierarchical dynamic of society. It is likely that Colombian scholars who misuse the SES in their research do so based on a misunderstanding that is already ingrained in society. That misunderstanding has become so real that they may not think to look at the way the SES categorizes houses

because the strata system has become part of peoples' identity. This could be one potential explanation as to why the SES is more often misunderstood by Colombian scholars than by scholars from other origins who probably need to research the SES in detail, as they may not be as familiar with it. However, this has not been proven and thus necessitates further analysis.

In conclusion, this section finds that 33% of the articles "that mentioned the SES" misused the SES in their research. This may imply the lack of a better measuring tool for socioeconomic status as well as a deep misunderstanding of what the government is measuring that has altered identity in Colombia. The two main ways in which scholars are misinterpreting the SES are, first, by assuming that the SES accounts for income of the individuals living in a given dwelling. Second, by considering that the stratum given by the government is pegged to the individual rather than a classification of housing only. When scholars misinterpret the system, they are committing deep methodological errors in their own research that can result in flawed findings. Furthermore, such mistakes may have negative consequences in Colombian society given that reputable scholars are making these mistakes in peer-reviewed articles that may very well be used later to inform policy decisions. However, not all papers presented problems; some of the researchers understood the SES correctly and used it as a tool to strengthen their own research.

This section demonstrates that there is continued need for further research in this field. Less than 15% of the papers analyzed critiqued the SES, which is alarming given the magnitude of the misinterpretation of this system and its potential social

impact. This chapter suggests that Colombian scholars, biased by their experiences as Colombian citizens, may be misusing the SES in their own research.

Through a process of understanding an ethnographic research of individual Colombian citizens' views and perceptions of the SES, the following chapter will focus on the impact that the SES is having on citizens of Medellín.

## SECTION FOUR

## IMPLICATIONS

Another important implication and for purposes of this dissertation, central to my argument, is that these epistemic communities are networks that emphasize and reinforce notions of hierarchy that circulate in society and become part of the lay expertise. Ordinary people develop specific expertise based on the knowledge created by epistemic communities. As a result, epistemic communities like the ones analyzed in this chapter have a protagonist role in reinforcing hierarchical categories that in turn exclude and stigmatize a large portion of Colombian society. This become especially problematic when the epistemic communities are majority white and male.

In sum, the SES categorization system has been transformed substantively from being a housing label to an identity-shaping tool used on individuals. In this chapter, this phenomenon was demonstrated in the way scholars and policymakers use SES in their research to describe socioeconomic status of individuals. This phenomenon was also observed in the introduction via memes and other examples of how this is exemplified in the vernacular of everyday Colombian citizens.

# CHAPTER THREE

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO SITUATE THE SES AS SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

Chapter two answers the first question of this dissertation: **1. How has the SES categorization system transformed substantively from being a housing label to an identity-shaping tool used on individuals?** Chapter four will answer the following question: 2. **Does the SES categorization system serve as symbolic boundaries that are reinforcing the hierarchy and exclusionary patterns of the country?**

In order to answer the second question, chapter three will discuss sociological theories that will help one locate and define the SES as symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are defined as "the types of lines that individuals draw when they categorize people" (Lamont 1992:1). The chapter will also discuss how symbolic boundaries become social boundaries that inhibit equity. This chapter will center Michéle Lamont's framework, as it is instrumental in identifying the criteria that "people use to define and discriminate between worthy and less worthy persons" (Lamont 1992:1). Furthermore, Lamont's theories will be problematized by bringing in the intersectionality framework from Kimberlé Crenshaw to help examining symbolic and social boundaries.

To this end and first, **Section One** goes over important theoretical frameworks. This includes social boundaries, intersectionality, and the concept of recognition. **Section Two** describes the different cultural categories through a survey of class formation as well as a targeted history of Antioquia. It overviews how utility companies

became privatized through neoliberalism and lists some common recognition[22] narratives that define worthy members of society based on the local history of the *departamento*. This section identifies exclusionary culture differences in Colombia through which the upper middle-class is defined. This category is important because members from this class control the allocation of the majority of resources.

**SECTION ONE**

**SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND THEORIES**

How do Colombians obtain access to good-paying jobs, training opportunities, and promotions? Typically, this happens through access to reputable educational degrees, prospects for mentorship, and a strong sense of belonging. This kind of access becomes available through formal and informal opportunities that are generally only available through one's social standing. Research shows that corporate success partly depends on employees conforming in cultural matters and not standing out in relation to the employer (Lamont 1992:1). Thus, it is imperative to question systems that exacerbate the categorization of people. The more boundaries that exist between groups, the more impediments and inequities will surface.

This section overviews theories that situate symbolic boundaries. Understanding how symbolic boundaries come about and influence outcomes is important to contextualize the implications as well as the different power dynamics that go on in any stratified society. Distinctions made by social actors in order to distinguish objects,

[22] Recognition- Providing narratives that include a large number of people defined as worthy members of the society. -Michèle Lamont

people, practices, time and space are tools that individuals and groups use to agree upon a definition of reality. In this way, symbolic boundaries help produce social boundaries. Social boundaries are "concrete social relationships between groups, typically with differential access to resources, power, or status" (Swarts 2011:455). Lamont and Molnar (2002) call for more work on the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries. This dissertation responds to this calling by examining the social boundaries that are created by the SES, which consists of concrete policies with real life consequences. This dissertation also explores cultural categories through which the upper-middle class defines cultural styles. Paying attention to this phenomenon is important because by the upper-middle class defining cultural styles, they are able to control the allocation of many valuable resources. In Chapter Two, it has already been explored how scholars and policymakers who are likely upper-middle class are defining individuals by using the SES in their research as a measuring tool.

Moreover, cultural styles are often reinforced by mass media and advertising. Examples of how the SES has been adopted by mass media can also be found in the introduction of this dissertation. Below is an example of the SES being used in social media:


*Figure 24 (Facebook Post by Vane Tinchi 2021)*

The Facebook post above depicts a photo of a totuma[23] set that is being sold for a very expensive price and re-packaged as a trendy eco product from Zara, a Spanish clothing and home goods store. The comment from the Facebook user reads, "How many strata higher does one need to be to call *totumas* eco-bowls?[24]" This is an interesting commentary on the SES, as it is making fun of capitalist modernity. This

[23] *Totumas* are bowls made out of the fruit of the totumo or taparo tree. The origin of the word comes from the Chaima. The Chaima were a Venezuelan Indigenous people from the northeastern region. Indigenous people oftentimes use it as a kitchen implement. It is generally used to hold liquids and solids, and to drink and transport water.

[24] Translated by author

example also shows how the SES is reinforced in social media. On the comment section of the same post, one can see additional photos of similar commentary.


*Figure 25 (Facebook Post by Vane Tinchi 2021)*

The theories and definitions explored in this chapter will allow us to study the criteria that Colombians use to define and discriminate between worthy and less-worthy members of society. For example, when I asked Erin Sorensen as part of the interview to list words that are used to describe a poor person, they said: "They call them *chusma*[25],

[25] Refers to a "lowlife," someone of low class

or *estos negros*[26], or something like that." More context on this interview and many others will be explored in chapter five.

In order to understand and name the types of lines that individuals draw when they categorize people, we will explore the definition and theories behind symbolic boundaries.

**Symbolic Boundaries**

> 'Symbolic Boundaries' are the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others. These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power. The term 'symbolic boundaries' also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular. (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015)

Symbolic boundaries take many forms. They are distinctions between types of people. The criteria for these distinctions vary depending on many factors including local and historical context, the role of morality and religion, and tolerance for inequity.[27] The more opportunities for a multiplicity of criteria that a given society allots its members, the more inclusive it becomes. Since the 1960s, the literature on symbolic boundaries has gained prominence given its link to indirect power. Sociologists have studied inequality by analyzing symbolic systems. Disciplines including anthropology, history, literature studies, and sociology have been influenced by the writings from

---

[26] "These Blacks"

[27] Societies with high levels of economic inequality are less averse to inequality. Existing inequity generates higher inequality tolerance.

Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman, and Michael Foucault on the topic (Lamont et al. 2015:851).

Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, two of the founding fathers of sociology, play a prominent role in defining symbolic boundaries. Emile Durkheim uses the term to analyze moral order. He defines society by its symbolic boundaries. By society sharing a common definition of the profane and the sacred, they create internal bonds. Durkheim ventures further by pointing out that moral order— "the common system of perception of reality that regulates, structures, and organizes relations in a community" —operates less through coercion than through intersubjectivity (Lamont et al. 2015:851).

Max Weber, on the other hand, was more interested in how social boundaries worked to stratify society rather than to create a sense of inclusiveness. He describes people as competing for resources and discriminating against groups based on "cultural characteristics, such as lifestyle, language, education, race, and religion" (Lamont et al. 2015:851). Through these distinctions, people form status groups in which they define superiority in relation to other groups. Criteria then develops for what constitutes honor, and what qualifies a member to enter or exit a given status group.

Thorstein Veblen furthers Weber's work and suggests that habits of thought (classifying and delineating) are important approaches to generate boundaries between status groups. Moreover, he poses that status groups are often organized centering superiority and inferiority in relation to employment, consumption and leisure. An example of this is the concept of idleness. It requires free time and money, thus it

symbolizes high status. Veblen also coined the term “conspicuous consumption.” He argues that honor can be conferred through possessions and display of wealth. This is salient not only in between different groups but also within groups. Veblen concludes that conspicuous consumption is more prevalent in peaceful times. His analysis assumes that people have a tendency to improve and climb up the social ladder (Lamont et al. 2015).

Mary Douglas follows Durkheim’s work in her 1966 publication, *Purity and Danger*. She looks at the role of rituals and the way classification systems produce meaning, order, and form. In 1970, Douglas describes symbolic structures as reflecting group structures. She explores how the system of social control is expressed through the body and observable artifacts of everyday life. “She argues that the basis of order in social life is the presence of symbols that demarcate boundaries” (Lamont et al. 2015:851). Douglas’s focus is on how societies differentiate themselves across and within groups. She demarcates groups depending on the degree of control and the extent to which their system competes with others.

By 1977 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron proposed that lower academic performance was a result of institutional biases created by boundary structures and not by children’s lower academic ability. They suggest that schools measure a student’s ability by evaluating children on vocabulary, cultural references, and command of “high culture.” As a result, children from lower classes are penalized for not being exposed or not having access to said cultural capital (Lamont et al. 2015:851). Given the hegemonic nature of symbolic boundaries, children often blame

themselves for their failure and desist from striving to climb the social ladder. This has the effect of further perpetuating social boundaries.

In 1984, Bourdieu analyses the world of taste and cultural practices. He furthers the concept of class differentiation by extending it to peoples' sense of taste and lifestyle. He demonstrates that the ability of people to exhibit proficiency in an *adequate* sense of taste and the ability to have a specific lifestyle associated with members who belong in a privileged group are key to the reproduction of class privileges. "Dominant groups define their own culture as superior. Thereby they exercise 'symbolic violence,' i.e. impose a specific meaning as legitimate while concealing the power relations that are the basis of its force (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977[1970]: p.4)" (Lamont et al. 2015:852). Symbolic violence was certainly observed during the semi-structured interviews.

Chapter five will overview the most prominent symbolic boundaries that were discussed throughout the interviews in the context of the SES. Some of the boundaries that will be explored are closely linked to narratives of paternalism, meritocracy, and definitions of belonging based on education level, occupation, geography and capital endowment. Bourdieu and Passeron define symbolic boundaries as a binary. Members of society are situated in opposition: they are either in the dominated or the legitimate group, pure or impure, distinguished or vulgar, higher or lower, etc.

To problematize and further nuance this binary definition of symbolic boundaries, Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality will be reviewed.

> Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s as a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics. It exposed how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013:787).

Since the 1980s this definition has become influential in disciplines such as history, sociology and literature. By examining the dynamics of differences and sameness, the concept of intersectionality plays a major role in helping consider identities such as race, gender and other axes of power in academic discussions and new developments in fields such as organizational behavior (Cho et al. 2013:787). Intersectionality centers American Black women and Black feminism. And, by understanding the trajectory of intersectionality as part of a larger critique, it becomes evident that the intersectional lens looks beyond a narrower framework of understanding dichotomies and similarities. Intersectionality addresses large ideological structures beyond race and gender.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework is relevant to examining symbolic boundaries in the context of Colombia. Class and exclusionary practices cannot be understood in a vacuum by solely focusing on specific binaries. Socioeconomic status, race, and other identity categories are often understood and treated in isolation from one another. Bias and power are often explained through a binary of the dominated and the legitimate. This could look like high and low socioeconomic status, men and women, literate and illiterate, etc. Yet when dynamics are analyzed using said binaries, it implicitly denies intragroup differences, and it places people in discreet categories that are often not

fully accurate and are exclusionary. This illusion of differences is problematic because domination is often informed by multiple dimensions of someone's identity, such as class and sexual orientation. Moreover, "ignoring differences within groups contributes to tensions among groups" (Crenshaw 1991:1242). Ignoring differences in identities also disempowers people who hold more than one oppressed identity. "When one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relation that each attempts to challenge are strengthened" (Crenshaw 1991:1282).

While it is important to consider this level of nuance when analyzing the SES, it is also important to acknowledge that this framework was developed in a different context. After the theory of intersectionality was introduced, there have been a plethora of critiques about ways in which scholars use this framework and apply it to different contexts. These tensions, however, are not unresolvable, as the widening scope of intersectionality and praxis has "amplified its generative focus as an analytical tool to capture and engage contextual dynamics of power" (Cho et al. 2013:787).

In 2013 Kimberlé Crenshaw herself and Leslie McCall published an article titled "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." In this article, they discuss how the scope and content of intersectionality has been a useful concept that has been deployed in disciplines like queer and legal studies. They pose that the intersectionality concept has played a major role in facilitating considerations of axes of power in a wide range of political and academic discussions.

> We think answers to questions about what intersectional analysis is have been amply demonstrated by what people are deploying it to do…Intersectionality has, since the beginning, been posed more as a nodal point than as a closed

> system—a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities. This seems to us to be a more apt description of intersectionality's starting point than one that frames intersectionality as only categorically, spatially, or temporally rooted in specific relations or superficially preoccupied with "difference." … Exactly how intersectionality and its presumed subjectivities travel across disciplines and national contexts turns not only on the various theoretical and methodological prisms at play but also on the race, gender, and other discursive prisms through which the theory and its originating contexts are read. (Cho et al. 2013:791)

In sum, intersectionality within other discursive fields may encompass similar dynamics that are observed in the US. Moreover, while it is important to pay attention to the criticism presented about this theory, this dissertation and more broadly the study of the SES in Colombia can benefit from the framework and the way it interrogates power. After all, this dissertation analyzes ways in which members of society are recognized as worthy or excluded. Critical race theory and feminist theory through intersectionality analyze how patriarchal and racial social settings are the spaces where people often experience symbolic boundaries.

While it is evident that there is nuance that needs to be taken into consideration around Bourdieu and Passeron's binary definition of symbolic boundaries, it is also true that through these binaries, dominant groups mark cultural distance, monopolize resources and opportunities, and exclude other members of society. These boundaries lend themselves to deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that people possess due to life experiences. This physical embodiment of cultural capital is one of Bourdieu's most famous and influential concepts, which he termed "habitus." The imprint of

habitus has unquestionable effects that shape and further distinguish people among social groups.

After the work of Bourdieu and his collaborators was translated into English in the 1980s, many scholars came out with theories that furthered, critiqued, or problematized their work. Michele Lamont in 1992 published a study in which she finds that "morality, cultural capital and material success are defined differently and that their relative importance vary across national context and by subgroups" (Lamont et al. 2015:852). Below is a chart highlighting the main characteristics identified by the scholars listed in this section. They are presented in chronological order and end with Michel Lamont's observations. These characteristics play an important role in defining and understanding symbolic boundaries.

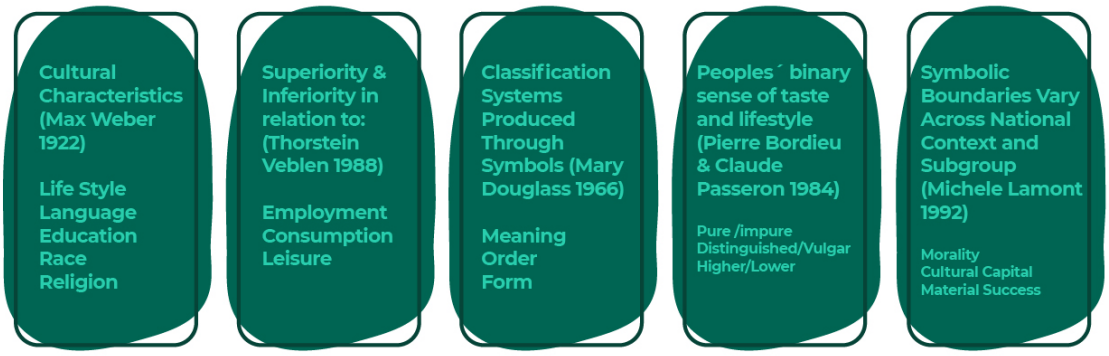



*Figure 26 (González Díez 2021)*

Michele Lamont's observations are important for this dissertation as the topic in question has a unique national context that needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the symbolic boundaries at play. National context is key when defining

morality, cultural capital, and material success. Scholars Consuelo Uribe Mallarino, Liany Katerin Ariza, and Jaime Ramirez Moreno offer an analysis of the Colombian national context by finding the following elements as determinants of social inequality: 1) education level, 2) occupation, 3) geographical and public policy environment, and 4) capital endowment of the families of origin.

**Cultural Repertoires and Other Definitions-**

Sociologists have studied inequality for a long time. They have described it as a multidimensional phenomenon. This includes Weber's (1922) essay on class status and party, Bourdieu's conceptualization of class, and students of intersectionality who distinguished between structural, political, and representation aspects of gender and racial inequalities (Michèle Lamont 2018:423). Another dimension of inequality has been the **recognition gaps**, defined as "disparities of cultural membership between groups" (Michèle Lamont 2018:423). As Bourdieu pointed out through his theory of symbolic violence, economic aspects of society are not the only important factor in shaping inequality. Recognition is an important aspect to take into consideration. **Recognition** is defined as "the affirmation of positive qualities of human subjects and groups" (Honneth 2014:329). It is a social act by which members of a given group feel seen and positively included. Recognition grants cultural membership to individuals. **Cultural membership** is defined as "the status of individuals who are collectively defined as valued members of a community" (Michèle Lamont 2018:423).

The opposite of recognition is **stigmatization**, "understood as a cultural process of negatively qualifying identities and differences" (Michèle Lamont 2018:423). Inequality not only has to do with unequal resources but with recognition.


*Figure 27 (González Díez 2021)*

Comparative cultural anthropologists have demonstrated that inequality looks different among nations. When specifically assessing the recognition gaps it is inferred that cultural repertoires are unevenly available across national context. **Cultural repertoires** are defined as a "set of tools available to individuals to make sense of the reality they experience (building on Swidler 1986)"(Michèle Lamont 2018:423). Examples of cultural repertoires include national myths (e.g. racial democracy in Brazil), cultural myth of belonging (e.g. multiculturalism in Canada), transnational repertoires (neoliberalism and human rights), and criteria of worth (socioeconomic success in the US) (Michèle Lamont 2018:424).

The influence and power of the upper middle class to shape class boundaries is an important feature to notice. Bourdieu poses that "the upper middle class imposed its criteria of evaluation of other classes in a variety of settings, and that these criteria shaped the boundaries that it draws towards other classes" (Lamont 2017:16). Emilio from stratum 6 demonstrates this criterion of evaluation at work:

Emilio, Strata 6

> Ana María: Can you please share your definition of high class?
>
> Emilio: [High class people] are those who help others around them. They are modest even though they live in luxury, they do so without opulence. Those who do the opposite are the nouveau riche like the mafia people, they are the ones who ride around in Mercedes Benz, the Medellín rich, well people who are high class, of good class, those of lineage in other words, are people who are modest and collected.

Thus, social boundaries are often reproduced by members of the upper middle class through cultural repertoires. In the example above, Emilio's description of a person of high class includes descriptions of those who do not belong to said class. It has been determined by the people in power what are the activities, goods, and attitudes that do not fit with their boundaries. As Weber argued, boundaries are rarely created from scratch. Instead, they are determined by available cultural resources and by spatial, geographic, and socio-structural constraints. Indeed, most of the boundaries "have to do with public evaluation of behavior, with degrees of conformity to social codes, rather than with hypothetical inner states. We often simply take them for granted and enact them unthinkingly" (Lamont 1992:11).

In sum, section one of chapter three offered a theoretical survey of symbolic boundaries and definitions of cultural repertoires among other important vocabulary relevant to this dissertation. Section Two will use the theories described in this section to explain the Antioquia case.

## SECTION TWO

## AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL CATEGORIES IN ANTIOQUIA


*(BPI Colombia 2018) Figure 28*

Now that the theoretical foundation has been laid out to understand symbolic boundaries, this section will focus on three main categories that are central cultural repertoires in the Colombian case. Some of the research presented here is relevant to the whole country and some will focus more specifically on the Antioquia region. The chart below overviews the organization of this section.

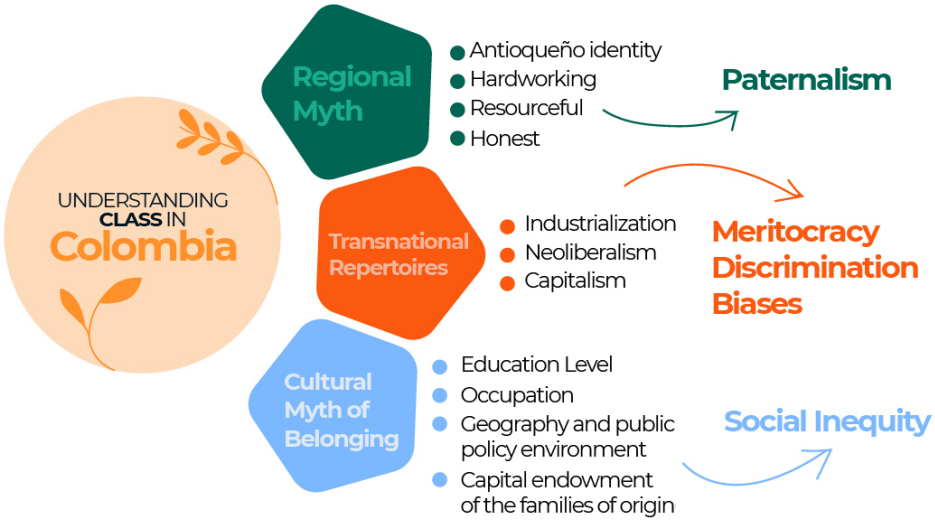



*Figure 29* *(González Díez 2021)*

**Part A** will go over the Antioqueño regional myth. This myth is rooted in its history, which is an aberration from the rest of the regions in the country due to its inhospitable terrain. The conditions of the land led to different working conditions. Instead of working for Spanish lords in haciendas, Antioqueños owned small farms throughout the steep mountains. The forbidding conditions also made it difficult for the Spanish rulers to keep proper surveillance and collect taxation. As a result, Antioqueños enjoyed independence from the Crown which allowed for favorable economic conditions in comparison to their compatriots in other regions of Colombia.

Due to these conditions, a narrative was created in which the Antioqueño was seen as a hard-working and resilient individual capable of managing difficult terrains and able to prosper. Over time, the regional identity of the *departamento* was one of

promoting civilization which placed Antioqueños as cultured and domesticated, values that at the time of modernization were highly regarded. This narrative was differentiated from the rest of the country. Cultural repertoires are important in a national context to define who belongs and who does not belong as an esteemed and respectable member of society. The SES operates on top of these cultural repertoires. As will be explored in chapter five, one of the myths of a person who lives in a low SES is that they are not cultured, do not work hard, and do not seize opportunities. Thus, the Antioqueño who lives in a low SES has an identity that is contradictory. This causes added identity complexities that further erodes a sense of belonging.

**Part B** will be focused on transnational repertoires that are central to understanding of class in Colombia. The first concept covered here will be industrialization. Medellín was the first city in the country to go through all of the stages of industrialization. This economic model played an important role in reinforcing certain cultural characteristics which remain relevant today. Some of the cultural characteristics include and are not limited to paternalism, race, and meritocracy and play an important role in the way Colombians interact and relate to one another. The city quickly transitioned its economy from industrialization in the 1920s to a neoliberalist and capitalist economy by the 1940s. Thus, industrialization, neoliberalism, and capitalism are central transnational repertoires for understanding the SES. By the time the SES was introduced, Medellín had already gone through all of the stages of industrialization thus there was in high demand for utility infrastructure that sped up the privatization process. As explored in chapter one, the SES was created out of a neoliberal policy to

privatize public utilities. After the introduction of neoliberal reforms, the government continued to depend on entrepreneurial efforts and private capital as the source of economic growth. The government continued to limit domestic economic control, and while the economy relatively grew, the distribution of income became and continues to become more and more skewed. Rewards of production remained predominantly in the hands of a few. This economic imbalance impacts a sense of self for those who are not able to acquire as much economic capital. Thus, capitalism offers collective imaginaries rooted in meritocracy. Capitalism supports narratives of self-worth being linked to economic prosperity and thus fosters a greater tolerance of inequality which leads to discrimination.

**Part C** will cover the cultural myth of belonging. Cultural repertoires vary depending on the context. Michele Lamont demonstrated in her previous research that there are nuances to each country that should be taken into consideration when determining the cultural categories that recognize someone as belonging or being stigmatized as an outsider. In the Colombian case, Moreno et al. offer four determinants. The four determinants are education level, occupation, geographical and public policy environment, and capital endowment of the families of origin. According to their research, these categories are central to the collective imaginaries of Colombians in the way they understand and classify members of society. The last two determinants are closely linked to the framework used by the SES to determine stratum. As such, it is important to keep these categories in mind as one analyses the SES and the power it has on informing identity for individuals as well as demarcating symbolic boundaries

between individuals. The Colombian cultural myth of belonging carries strong narratives. The SES was implemented on top of those existing narratives. Thus, the SES draws upon the existing narratives as a foundation that then serves to reinforce symbolic boundaries.

## Part A

### REGIONAL MYTH OF THE ANTIOQUEÑO

To this day, the Antioqueño is known as a hard-working entrepreneur that will succeed no matter what. This myth has been widely researched and is known far and wide among Colombians. To understand the origins of this myth, one must look to the history of Antioquia.

### BRIEF HISTORY OF MEDELLÍN AND ANTIOQUIA

The social boundaries that existed in Colombia before the SES was introduced helped inform the implementation and reinforcement of said system. These boundaries include the myth of the Antioqueño. As such, this dissertation would not be complete without an historical survey of the Antioquia region to contextualize the existing cultural repertoires available to the Colombian society at the time of the introduction of the SES. Over time these boundaries have interplayed with the SES and its categories.

Colombia is known for having a different cultural and economic identity in each *departamento;* people from one place talk, dress, and behave differently from people in another. The claims that are made in this dissertation are specific to the Antioquia region. I include the region of Antioquia in my findings and not just the city of Medellín given that the framework of my analysis is based on the culture of the region and many

of the participants from the semi-structured interviews migrated from rural areas of Antioquia into the city.

Antioquia sits on the central and western mountain range of the Andes and thus has the most irregular and steepest landscape of Colombia (Agudelo Ramírez 1986, 19). This region is located in the northwestern part of the country and has a narrow littoral abutting the Caribbean Sea. Currently, Antioquia is the sixth largest and the second most populous *departamento* and it has 13.3 percent of the total population (6 million people) ("Estudios de La OCDE: Educación Superior En El Desarrollo Regional Y de Ciudades. Antioquia, Colombia" 2011). It is known for its coffee, tourism, textile, and flower industries. Figure 31 displays a map of Antioquia's topography:


*Figure 30 (Gifex Maps 2003)*

Given that the current social dynamics of the region are rooted in its history, this section is organized chronologically, beginning with the colonization period. Antioquia transitioned from being an independent region that operated in small-scale agriculture, favoring peasant workers to an industrialized *departamento* controlled by neoliberal policies. This shift put most residents at a disadvantage due to the uneven distribution of wealth and the violent environment that forced many out of their small landholdings into neighborhoods that emerged from an unmet need for affordable housing in Medellín and its peripheries. It was under these unequal and oppressive circumstances that the SES was eventually introduced.

This section will focus on the overview of the creation of the Antioqueño identity during the colonization period, which has persisted in contemporary times, and which plays an important role in the identity of the individuals as they now navigate another layer through the introduction of the SES. This section offers the regional myth of the Antioqueño identity and a cultural repertoire to help us understand social boundaries in Colombia. The SES is now an influential system that further complicates the nuances of societal interactions of the region. The values associated with low stratum clash with the values of the Antioqueño identity given that rich people often associate low stratum with laziness, lack of work ethic, and the usual stereotypes associated with being poor. As the Antioqueño identity is associated with success and hard work, this disparity between the regional Antioqueño myth and the perceived deficiencies of the Antioqueños in the lower stratum creates social tensions and problems in Antioqueño society, as it takes away agency of those living in low stratum. Therefore, it is important to understand the historical context of Antioqueños in order to have a deeper knowledge of the problematic of introducing a label in this already complicated social dynamic. To help the reader navigate this section, I created Figure 32 keeping in mind its relevance to the SES and the current state of the social dynamics in Antioquia.

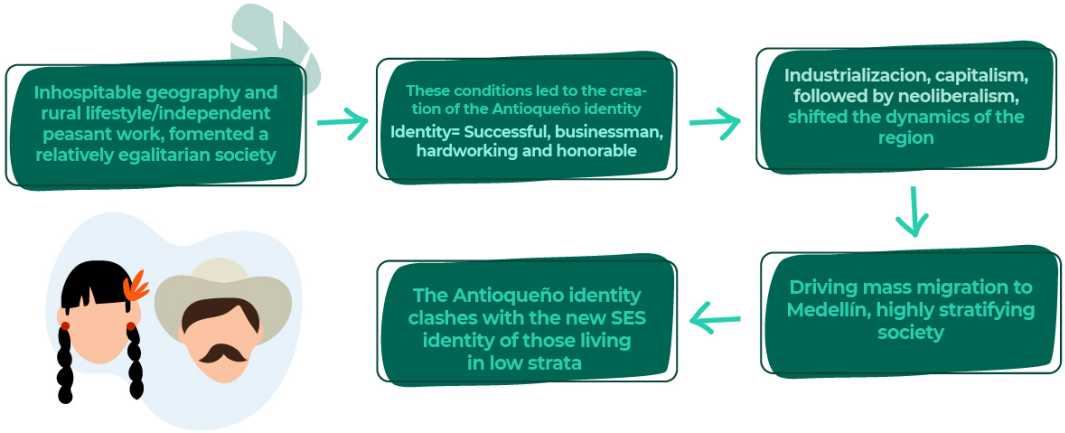



*Figure 31* (González Díez 2021)

**COLONIZATION**

Antioquia has a peculiar story, one of resilience and opportunity despite adversity. When the region was first colonized, it was known for the vast amounts of gold found in its mountain ranges. Without gold, Antioquia would probably still be a vacant site due to its inclement terrain (Agudelo Ramírez 1986, 16). In 1539, the Antioqueño society found itself in economic anguish and was forced to diversify personal and family work by either joining the mining sector, which enslaved members of society, or by finding independent work. The latter option was unique to this region, as the rest of the country and much of Latin America operated in a semi-feudal structure (Agudelo Ramírez 1986, 25).

Through gold mining, the population of Antioquia grew exponentially. Nonetheless, the economy in the region shifted from a feudal model to one that supported a more egalitarian society. The enslaving and oppressive gold mining companies were abandoned due to inadequate technology, poor climate, and expensive prices of importing enslaved people. As a result, the mining trade became free and

relatively open, which enabled the inhabitants of Antioquia to adopt a peculiar, individual economic model that became unique to this region (Agudelo Ramírez 1986, 25). As a result of independent peasant work and mining activity in the area, Medellín became an economic center around the 1630s. The new economic hub attracted people from all economic backgrounds to the Aburrá Valley (the natural basin of the Medellín river).

By the early 1600s the social dynamics of Antioquia did not follow the same pattern that was observed throughout Latin America. Instead of a feudal economy that mostly benefited the Spaniards and *criollos,*[28] independent peasant work offered a relatively even playing field, making Antioquia a new land of opportunity. Around the same time, Licenciado Francisco de Herrera Campuzano, judge of the Royal Audience and chancellery, decided to go against the crown and promote indigenist policies protecting the "naturals." He was able to protect not only indigenous people that lived in reservations, but also those who were settling in new villages near Medellín (Agudelo Ramírez 1986, 25). All of the changes in the economic and political sectors allowed for new migrations to break away from the colonial lifestyles of other regions that promoted highly stratified societies. In the Aburrá Valley, the population of about 25,000 was composed of Afro-descendant enslaved people; Afro-descendant free people; a small number of the surviving Indigenous groups; a small group of *criollos* (which despite the more egalitarian economic model, dominated society) and a growing

[28] A person from Spanish South or Central America, especially one of pure Spanish descent.

number of mestizos[29] and people of mixed African and Spanish ancestry. At this point in history, Antioquia was heading in a direction of greater equality and opportunity. This was due in part to small landholdings and the rough geography in the area that supported a more egalitarian economy and a less stratified society.

Land distribution in the Antioquia region varied from that in the rest of the country. Due to difficulties with imports to the region, the big-scale, European-style technical plantations were not developed in Antioquia (Agudelo Ramírez 1986, 26). By 1783, the Antioqueño society was disillusioned with a deep economic and social crisis which drove it to rely on small scale agriculture using Indigenous methods. As a result of misery and shortage of food, the Viceroy demanded that each family cultivate a determined amount of corn per year. This was done to control the alleged (from the perspective of the Spanish crown) laziness and vice on the part of the "natives." Depending on the size of the family and the cultivation capabilities of the land, this policy allotted about four square leagues per family, which is the equivalent of close to twelve miles ("Medellín, En Infraestructura, Se Lució - El Mundo - Noticias de Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia Y El Mundo - Periódico El Mundo" 2015). In addition to planting corn, *Antioqueños* were expected to plant fruit trees and cocoa wherever the soil was fertile enough. People also often tended to chickens, turkeys, cows, and pigs to supplement their income. Despite the Spanish crown taking these measures based on racist and selfish interests. There were unintended consequences that positively

[29] A person of mixed race, especially one having Spanish and Indigenous descent.

contributed to the social and economic future of the region by providing their own version of land reform that would not be accomplished anywhere else in the country. These laws along with the other conditions already mentioned, stimulated migration to Antioquia, turning an inhospitable terrain into a highly populated, progressive region.

The Antioqueño identity was formed under the context of an inhospitable region where its residents succeeded through resilience and hard work. This regional identity narrative has been highly researched and supported over time. María Tersa Arcila Estrada, an anthropologist and researcher of regional studies from the Universidad de Antioquia, corroborates this theory.

> The Antioqueño people came up as a mountain society confronting with tenacity the rugged and hostile environment which provided obstacles for their progress. They succeeded in their struggle against those difficult settings, which cemented feelings of pride and promoted the values of drudgery and a dynamic and entrepreneurial character. This was validated through the evident material and economic progress seen in Antioquia throughout the XIX century…
>
> This body of ideas that sustain the narrative of *the "eulogy to difficulty"* [her term to describe the Antioqueño pride after overcoming adversity] allowed for the establishment of the differentiation between this group and other regional groups in the country, this narrative was strengthen in the XIX century, generating a strong consensus among the population. (Arcila Estrada 2016, 40)

Since colonial times, the Antioqueño society developed a strong identity narrative for the region. This narrative yielded notions and feelings of unity and community associated with the region that they occupied (Arcila Estrada 2016, 43). This narrative was built on a foundation of promoting civilization, an important component of the colonizing rhetoric. Civilization carried the connotation of culture and domestication. In a geographical context, through hard work, the Antioqueño

transformed the natural into the civilized (Arcila Estrada 2016, 53). The civilized is then associated with institutionalization and control of the territory and the resources. In this context, those who have access to better utility infrastructure are civilized compared to those who do not have the same access. As a result, the adoption of the SES as an identity indicator presents a juxtaposition of identities for those who live in low strata. This observation is important to this dissertation because following this logic, citizens who identify with low strata, cannot uphold the identity of the Antioqueño, and thus lose agency. As a result, Antioqueños who live in low SES are often not recognized as members who belong and rather are stigmatized given their social status. In addition to socioeconomic status, race and gender place a central role in defining symbolic boundaries. While the role of this dissertation is not to define in detail the different identities that play into the intersectionality that grants Colombians positionality within the social hierarchy, this section will include a brief history of Afro-descendants' identity formation and struggle towards recognition. This subgroup was chosen given the many heinous crimes committed against them and the importance of highlighting and centering Black lives in our society in order to call attention to such an important yet dismissed issue.

**AFRO-DESCENDANTS, IDENTITY FORMATION AND THE STRUGGLE TOWARDS RECOGNITION**

Representation
is vital
Otherwise the butterfly
Surrounded by a group of moths
Unable to see itself

Will keep trying to become the moth
-Rupi Kaur

> Afro-Colombians are a diverse ethnic group. Their ancestors were (Black) African slaves [enslaved] from several ethnic groups in Africa, who were brutally brought to the country against their will. As a result of racist practices and other human-rights violations against them, many Afro-Colombians have been affected by self-esteem problems. However, and despite the above threats, other Afro-Colombians have resisted the state ethnic projects and maintained their ethnic identity as a valuable cultural and political tool.
>
> - Leonardo Reales Jiménez

Leonardo Reales Jiménez, a prominent Afro-Indigenous activist, scholar, and comedian shares his experience navigating an elite Colombia university in the 1990s. As shared in chapter two as part of a representation example, Dr. Reales Jiménez discusses his experience going to higher education in one of the most prominent universities in Colombia. “I was the only Afro-Indigenous person out of more than ten thousand students. Some colleagues called me ‘the Negro’ of the university and made jokes about my indigenous background. I did not know how to respond to their racist verbal attacks. My ethnic identity did not exist at that time, and for many reasons I was confused about my weak racial (skin-color) identity.” (Reales Jimenez 2012:113)

Reales Jiménez’ experience demonstrates the problematic and complex nature of ethnic and racial identity in Colombia. Out of more than ten thousand students, he was the only Afro-Indigenous person that he knew of. Capital endowment of the families of origin as well as access to a quality higher education are two very important cultural repertoires that Moreno et al. offer as central to the construction of the Colombian narrative of belonging. These categories signal to others a status of

recognition that in the case of Dr. Reales Jiménez it becomes more difficult to navigate, to demonstrate, and ultimately to be accepted. The mere fact that Dr. Reales Jimenez did not identify another person like him has deep implications on his sense of belonging in a given space.

Representation is central to fostering a sense of belonging. Representation matters as it signals to other members of the same group that they belong, that they are welcomed, and that they have what it takes to succeed in that environment. In order to have representation, there needs to be clarity around identity formation, among many other structural changes in our society.

These statistics below demonstrate the social disadvantage of Afro-Colombian communities in Medellín, and the limited employment options given the average level of education. When looking at the Medellín case, according to the mayor's office illiteracy rates among Afro-Colombians at a high 16.05 percent. 32.54 percent of Afro-Colombians in the region have completed up to primary school, 39.86 percent have completed up to secondary education, and only 11.5 percent have attained technical or higher education (Condiciones de vida de la población negra, afrocolombiana…).

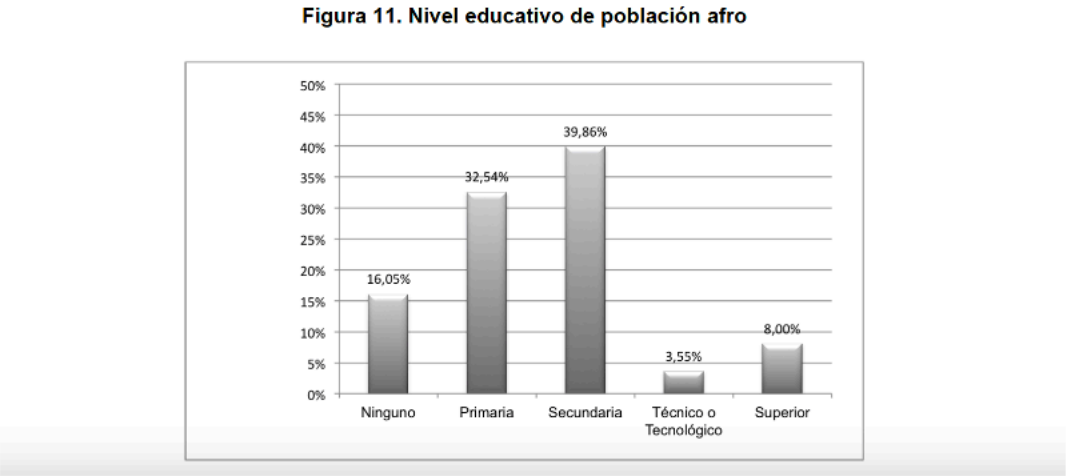



*Figure 32 Education Level of Afro-Colombia population in Medellín*

In order to understand some of the roots of the inequity that is evident today, it is important to look to history. Between 1810 and 1820, Colombia was becoming independent from the crown through the war of independence. The political environment was tense. Colombia had suffered colonization, been the subject of a religious crusade, and was then led by mostly white Spanish *conquistadores* and their offspring, who sometimes were also of mixed Indigenous or African heritage.

While the country began negotiating what it meant to become independent from the Crown, it had to grapple with the different identities present. Society was already divided by socio-racial castes (*sociedad de castas*). *Casta* was a pejorative term to define people of mixed backgrounds. The hierarchy comprised of Euro-mestizos, free people of African descent, Indigenous people, and (Black) enslaved people. These castes were controlled by white people, both Europeans and c*riollos*.

Afro-Colombians were not allowed to have professional careers or to have access to education, yet when it was time to fight in the war of independence, they

were permitted to serve in segregated militias. Given the preferential status the whiter *castas* were afforded, there was an effort by individuals to be as close as possible to the top. There were and are many benefits to fitting into that preferred category. Some Afro-mestizos and Afro-indigenous purchased a certificate of "pure-blood" which was knows as the "*gracias al sacar*." These certificates were very difficult to attain given the limited resources available to those who would be interested in purchasing. The "pure-blood" certificate granted people social respect and access to benefits (Reales Jimenez 2012:122).

Given the precarious conditions of thousands of people of African descent, they viewed the Crown as a protector and the independence process as a greater threat to their wellbeing. This public opinion is what drove creole liberator Simón Bolívar to offer enslaved people freedom and military rank if they joined the liberation fight (Reales Jimenez 2012:124). However, Bolívar took this stance only as a short-sighted war strategy. Ultimately, he was worried about "*la pardocracia"*[30] and believed that ambitions of Afro-descendants needed to be limited. Even though Afro-Colombians greatly contributed to the war of independence, their contributions have been invisible to the independence narrative and nation building process. Among some of the Afro-mestizos who achieved highest military rank are General Piar and Admiral Padilla.

However, when General Piar and Admiral Padilla began challenging some of the exclusionary and racists initiatives, Bolivar saw them as a threat. Padilla became the

[30] Afro-mestizos' rule

hero of the Battle of Maracaibo in 1823 and at some point Bolivar stated that he was "the most important man in Colombia" (Reales Jimenez 2012:125). However, Padilla became a threat by being of great influence to the *castas* and having sociopolitical power that questioned the white supremacist hierarchy. Bolívar had serious reservations as evidenced by his letters:

> Padilla will be able to do whatever he wants if he keeps leading his people. Equality before the law is not enough for the pardos in their present mood. They want absolute equality as a social and public right. They will demand "la pardocracia," that they, the pardos, should rule. This is a very natural inclination which will ultimately lead to the extermination of the privileged class (Reales Jimenez 2012:125).

After Colombia won the war of independence, it declared itself a homogenous and Roman Catholic nation. Afro-Colombians were then faced with a decision: 1) to adhere to the Colombian narrative of a monoculture which was inherently white or to 2) defend their identity as a distinct group (Reales Jimenez 2012:114). Some Afro-Colombians opted to assimilate to the monoculture narrative as they perceived this to be strategic for survival and inclusion. Others opted for preserving their identity as a distinct group. This presented and continues to present challenges for a unified narrative around ethnicity and race.

A very successful example of an Afro-Colombian community that opted for defending their identity as a distinct group is the people of San Basilio de Palenque. Located in the municipality of Bolívar in northern Colombia, it is the first "free-town" in the Americas. It was founded over two hundred years ago, before Colombia achieve independence from the Crown. In 2005 UNESCO declared San Basilio de Palenque a

"Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005"[31](Marca País Colombia 2018). Black pride in Palenque is palpable. Children are instructed to read about their history for about an hour per day. Palenque was founded by Benkos Bioho[32] in 1603. In 1603 the Spanish captured Benkos Bioho and "the maroon movement went underground and was passed to Black women who spearheaded the work by braiding maps to freedom land in their scalps, covering it with head wraps and donning baskets of fruit atop their head wraps to blend in with the rest of the enslaved population" (Quess 2021).

PAUSE.

FULL. HARD. STOP. Here's the part where the poet takes a moment to breathe in the awe of witnessing his art form living and breathing in a real-life metaphor, then attempts to trace the silhouette of that greatness by crafting some metaphor about how Black women encompass the cosmic codes to liberation in their chromosomes and braid those patterns through the beauty of their majestic beings. Now here's the part where the poet's pen collapses, falls at the altar of what already is, and realizes there are no words that can be crafted with more brilliance than what the black woman has already done herself. Besides, the sacrosanct spirits of these (at least in part) Senegalese women already exist somewhere in his New Orleans bred DNA. So just breathe and watch the magic unfold. Double besides: Colombians, and more specifically residents of Palenque already have a saying to encompass this beauty. "La magia de las mujeres Negras," or "the magic of the Black woman." That's right, Black girl magic, the antebellum Afro-Latinx version. Aka they been outchea y'heard me? And they still outchea. In the modern day, Black women adorned in colorful dresses with fruit baskets atop their heads are called Palenqueras. They promenade through the streets of downtown Cartagena taking pictures with tourists as they preserve the legacy of their ancestors.

[31] Not that an UNESCO recognition is needed in order to give legitimacy and value to such an empowering, impressive, and rich in culture place.

[32] He had been kidnapped from Guinea-Bissau and brought to Colombia.

– A Scribe Called Quess (Quess 2021)

Quess is a poet who lives in New Orleans and visited San Basilio de Palenque in 2019. He found many similarities between Cartagena, New Orleans, and Salvador. As I read his brilliant piece about his trip to Cartagena and Palenque, I encountered his own assessment of the SES as it pertains to race. It only took Quess one day in Cartagena to learn about the SES. His Airbnb host sat him down to offer him some context about the surrounding neighborhoods for his "safety."

> My Airbnb host sat me down to tell me about the 6 "levels" of Colombian neighborhoods. First you have Level 5 and 6, she told me. Those places are good neighborhoods. Like here in Manga where you are staying, Boca Grande that you drove through to get here and the airport right before it. These are good, safe neighborhoods. Then there are Level 4 neighborhoods. They're not as nice but not so bad. Then you have Levels 1 through 3. They are dangerous. Where the people might do crime to you, she told me. She was absolutely sincere in this. Said it without a hint of irony. I nodded my head through the typically classist (and unspoken racist) script as she unfolded it. (Quess 2021)

Quess then explains how he connected the SES classification with the racial make-up of those living in the lower four strata. He notes that the more affluent neighborhoods are gentrified and lack representation. "It was to these neighborhoods that the darker skinned Cartagenans had been banished by — ahem… "development." The expense of fast paced economic 'growth'" (Quess 2021). Quess' account demonstrates how to the naked eye it is evident that the SES is used as symbolic boundaries with an unspoken yet implied racial charge.

After the Colombian independence the term Afro-Colombian has been difficult to define by many. In fact, when Law 70[33] was enacted, there were self-identification issues "as some public institutions (or even Afro-Colombian organizations) did not accept that certain people should identify themselves as Afro-descendant. Some Afro-Colombians still believe that in order to exercise Law 70's special rights, the beneficiary has to be Afro-Colombian in skin color (meaning a Black person), while others defend people's ancestry as the main label of Afro-Colombian identity" (Reales Jimenez 2012:116). This controversy of belonging to the Afro-Colombian communities adds another layer of complexity and diversity within identity formation which is happening via different perspectives and understandings.

From a sociological perspective, it is imperative for individuals to feel like they belong. A relevant additional observation that Reales Jiménez makes is that: "constitutionally, belonging to an ethnic group means being able to make particular rights claims upon the state. This is one of the main reasons why defining the Afro-Colombian population is relevant to both human-rights and political levels" (Reales Jimenez 2012:118). When the SES estimates socioeconomic status without properly surveying the individuals living in said households and their identities, it is denying oppressed groups the opportunity to organize based on those statistics. Take for example the Afro-Colombian population, the majority lives in the lower three socioeconomic strata. The two charts below, depict the neighborhoods that host the

[33] Known as the law for Black Communities.

majority of the Afro-Colombian population in Medellín. The second chart was also displayed in the introduction.

**Figura 7. Distribución población afro por comunas**

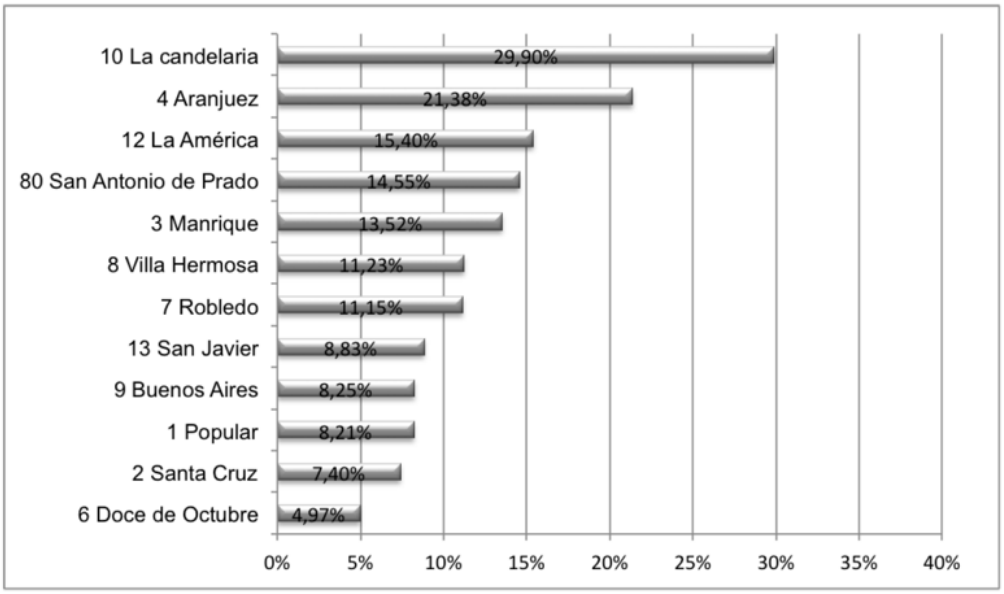



*Figure 33 (Sandoval 2010)*

**Figura 10. Personas por estrato socioeconómco de la vivienda según el grupo étnico**[16]

| | PERSONAS | | PERTENECE O SE CONSIDERA: | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Estrato de la vivienda | Total | % | Indígena | Negro(a), mulato, afrocolombiano, afrodescendiente | Mestizo | Blanco | Raizal | No sabe/No responde |
| Bajo Bajo | 298.851 | 12,62 | 395 | 17.213 | 239.726 | 34.979 | 33 | 6.506 |
| Bajo | 877.037 | 37,03 | 1.002 | 20.577 | 727.388 | 110.160 | 443 | 17.469 |
| Medio Bajo | 701.963 | 29,64 | 300 | 10.207 | 566.769 | 113.655 | 220 | 10.812 |
| Medio | 235.822 | 9,96 | 179 | 1.431 | 180.007 | 51.368 | | 2.837 |
| Medio Alto | 161.467 | 6,82 | | 620 | 114.752 | 43.623 | 45 | 2.427 |
| Alto | 93.142 | 3,93 | | 319 | 60.942 | 31.731 | | 150 |
| **TOTAL** | **2.368.282** | **100,00** | **1876** | **50.367** | **1.889.584** | **385.516** | **741** | **40.201** |
| % | 100,00 | | 8,00% | 2,13 | 79,79 | 16 | 0,03 | 1,70 |

*Figure 34 (Sandoval 2010)*

The above data was published by the Mayor's office of the city of Medellín in 2010. The creation of these charts would not have been possible without the activism of grass roots Afro-Colombian organizations who have lobbied, negotiated, and contributed to the creation of these important measuring categories. While these findings are important, the Colombian government has a responsibility to advance this research, to improve the census to be more inclusive of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, and to use the data to inform policy changes. Without proper measuring tools to determine this data in a systematic way done by the government, the onus of figuring this out falls directly on the community.

This kind of an effort is difficult to orchestrate at the national or even regional scope. Moreover, even if the Afro-Colombian community took it upon themselves to survey all Afro-Colombian households to determine SES, the validity of that data would come into question should it be used to place formal grievances to the state. This would be questioned, because of the inequity that already exists about who possesses the truth and the freedom to be knowledge producers. Thus, this lack of information serves the government to maintain the status quo and to prevent nuanced conversations in which racial and ethnic inequities would undoubtedly come into question. The fact that Afro-Colombians are concentrated in the lower SES, is no coincidence. This is a direct result of a nation that centers white supremacy. Systemic oppression manifests in the belonging narrative of the country. It is so deep rooted that most are not even beginning to question these inequities and simply see it as the way things go due to racists ideas like meritocracy and paternalism.

Not having access to data and information that tells the truth about the realities that Afro-Colombians have to face makes it all the more difficult to protest their rights and to organize. Afro-Colombians are faced with taking on a transnational narrative of white supremacy and having to unlearn internalized racism to then apply those concepts to the environment that they have to navigate. These systems are taxing, detrimental, humiliating, and ultimately a violation of human rights.

When looking at the region of Antioquia as a whole, the western part of the *departamento*, Urabá, is predominantly Black and the poorest area of the region. Access to infrastructure is significantly more limited there than it is in the rest of the

*departamento*. There are so many ways in which discrimination and absence of support are evident for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in Colombia.

In order for people to grapple with and decide how to identify and engage with ethnicity and racial narratives, they need to have access to their histories, to the contributions of their ancestors, and context as to how white supremacy serves as a hegemonic power of oppression. There is a need for more research centered on documenting the critical contributions of Afro-descendants to Colombian politics, culture, science, and all other aspects of society. There is also an urgent need for these contributions to cross over to the mainstream narrative of the building of Colombia as a nation in the past, present, and a priority for more access in the future.

When there have been centuries of racists politics and narratives, those narratives are then inherently present in the definition of belonging. This phenomenon explains why when I asked a participant in the interviews to come up with synonyms of the word poor, one of the terms that they came up with was "*Estos Negros*." The pejorative use of the word Negro to define someone of low socioeconomic status demonstrates the deep rootedness of these racist narratives, the association of race and ethnicity with status, and the importance of taking this notion into consideration when analyzing something as impactful as the SES. It is imperative to consider race and ethnicity given the impact that it has on peoples' sense of self and belonging when enacting any kind of governmental initiative, when creating policies both in the public and private sector.

Racist ideas grow out of discriminatory policies not the other way around
-Ibram X Kendi

Given this context it is no surprise that some individuals may opt out of identifying as Afro-Colombians. This gets into issues of colorism, internalized racism, and survival techniques. The need for empowerment, positive narrative building, and belonging narrative coming from the state level is paramount. Even though the Afro-Colombian identity-building process is growing, there are obstacles that inhibit some from embracing this ethnic minority status.

> It should be mentioned that Colombian legislation establishes that individuals have the right to not identify as an ethnic minority. Some Afro-Colombians still do that. Denying the African or indigenous (ethnic) background is a common occurrence in certain parts, since some people believe that they are more likely to succeed socioeconomically and politically if they deny their ethnic origins. This is why empowering Afro-Colombians based on their identity is not an easy task.
> -- Leonardo Reales Jiménez

There are several authors who study racial exclusion in the region. These authors which include Mosquera 2000; Sànchez and Bryan 2003; and Reales 2005, focus on how Afro-Colombians have been excluded from both the higher education and political systems until the 1990s (Reales Jimenez 2012). In 1993, De Friedemann defines "invisibility" as the permanent negation of the Afro-Colombian past and the idea (by elites) that Afro-Colombians were and are incapable of contributing to the cultural, economic and sociopolitical fabric of the nation. According to Friedemann this is one of the reasons Afro-Colombians remain "invisible" in history books and school curriculum in the past two hundred year (Reales Jimenez 2012:122).

While Law 70 has presented some changes, it is not enough. The Afro-Colombian community needs to be centered so that they can be equitably represented in politics, in academia, in all spheres of the Colombian society.

How does belonging and empowerment shift the conversation? By creating spaces in which peoples' identities are centered and celebrated, the white supremacist narrative gets weakened and representation grows. The more people in positions in power represent what the population looks like, the more equitable society can become. Dr. Reales Jiménez shares a powerful example of how his identity was reinforced as he joined a grassroots Afro-Colombian national Movement.

> In the late 1990s I joined the Afro-Colombian National Movement CIMARRON. While volunteering at CIMARRON, my Afro-Colombian (ethnic) identity grew significantly stronger. In 2001, after supporting local and national campaigns promoting affirmative-action policies for Afro-Colombians, I became the teacher of the "identity and political participation" workshop at the Afro-Colombian National School 'Nelson Mandela,' a training program on Afro-Colombian leadership, human rights, and social development. My shift from a weak "racial" identity to a strong ethnic identity was evident, and it did not take much time for me to be engaged in supporting the creation of a sociopolitical movement based on the Afro-Colombian ethnic identity discourse (Reales Jimenez 2012).

The way forward to a more equitable society is empowering Afro-Colombians and other oppressed identity groups using similar models like the National Movement CIMARRON. It is important for spaces to be led and centered by people who do not identify as a white cisgender male. Given how white supremacy and narratives of hypermasculinity are so prominent in all aspects of society in which power and decision making happens, Colombia needs to make intentional changes to the leadership so that this detrimental framework can begin to be dismantled. The National Movement

CIMARRON, is a great example of a grassroots movement that is able to empower individuals and to help shape the next generation of leaders that can help de-center white supremacy. When it comes to transnational repertoires, the African American identity discourse has had decisive influence on the Afro-Colombian identity building process.

**CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF ANTIOQUIA**

Medellín has been the capital of Antioquia since 1826, and, over time, it became a cradle for progress. Development drove Antioquia to become the only department in Colombia to have gone through all of the stages of productive activity and industrial development ("Medellín, En Infraestructura, Se Lució - El Mundo - Noticias de Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia Y El Mundo - Periódico El Mundo" 2015). Industrialization in this inhospitable region would not have been possible without the economic conditions of independent peasant work. In 1851, Antioquia only comprised 11.2 percent of the national population, but by 1928 it had nearly doubled to 21.9 percent. Over time, Antioquia's middle class became big enough to allow for industrialization, a phenomenon that was not seen anywhere else in the country. As such, Medellín ceased to be a small town and instead became an important industrial and economic center. However, by the 1940s, there was a high rate of increased population due to political and social violence in the rural surroundings (Coupé 1993, 21). The region transitioned into a capitalist economy which quickly stratified society and was no longer a land of opportunity for the average citizen. Many of the new migrants joined the coffee-

growing workforce both in Medellín as well as in the Aburrá Valley; however, there were not enough jobs for everyone.

The massive influx of people demanded new spatial transformations that could be perceived through city development. Existing roads were elongated, and an extension of the Spanish style city grid was added (Coupé 1993, 21). The city grew so much that citizens had to figure out how to handle the obstacle of the Medellín River that was now part of the city. Don Manuel José Alvarez was among the first to find value in the city west of the river. He strove to channel the river and, in 1891, founded a society with the purpose of urbanizing the city (Coupé 1993, 21). Through the standardization of infrastructure in Medellín, it is evident that powerful stakeholders exerted a significant impact on the plans of the city. As such, personal interests were prioritized, and the average citizen was not by any means the main beneficiary of the infrastructure projects.

**Part B**

**INDUSTRIALIZATION, CAPITALISM, AND NEOLIBERALIS; IMPACTFUL TRANSNATIONAL REPERTOIRES IN ANTIOQUIA**

The main transnational repertoires that influence the SES not only include industrialization, which was just discussed, but also capitalism and neoliberalism.

**Salient Transnational Repertoires in Antioquia**


*Figure 35 (González Díez 2021)*

This section will overview ways in which capitalism and neoliberalism were introduced in the region and how their presence influence how society define success. At the macro level, capitalism and neoliberalism made their way into international policy regimes impacting political and economic systems. At the microlevel, the way in which local society was defined was changed. Self-identification of individuals as well as the way they defined others began to change and to adhere more closely to the narrative brought about by these two consequential transnational systems. Inequality

began to look differently based on new definitions of cultural membership that were created through the collective imaginary.

The neoliberal script is one of competitiveness and narrow socioeconomic success. It is a dominant economic and political system of our current societies that worked its way into the policies of the Colombian government, the operations of organizations like the utility companies, and the lives of its people. “Developments that are associated with neoliberalism, such as the opening of markets and new policy regimes, put important constraints on many people, usually linked to their social position.” (Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont 2013:2) This in turn constricts the definition of self-worth and cultural membership. Neoliberalism may open up a few opportunities for those who may have been outsiders. In that way, neoliberalism may open certain boundaries across contexts. Paradoxically, neoliberalism closes many boundaries and reinforces the stigmatization of those who are seen as lacking in self-sufficiency. The issue here is that even if people are lacking in self-sufficiency due to structural issues beyond their control, the neoliberal narrative causes them to be excluded from the boundaries of the middle class (Lamont 2017).

Despite Antioquia having had a different history than the rest of the country during the Colonization Period and up to the late 1800s, it quickly fell to neoliberal and capitalist influences that left the majority of its people at an unfair disadvantage. *Antioqueños* went from enjoying a relatively egalitarian society to being mostly excluded from the upper middle-class boundaries. In the late 1800s, the process of public service municipalization began (Coupé 1993, 21). Don Manuel José Alvarez, with the help of

other shareholders, was able to bring water to Medellín, and, finally, through a loan from The Equitable Trust of New York City and a couple national banks, the municipality purchased the first aqueduct (Coupé 1993, 22). Also, the banker José Gutiérrez and the developer Manuel José Alvarez founded the electrical company *Compañia Antioqueña de Instalaciones Eléctricas* (Coupé 1993, 22). As is evident in this section, much of the infrastructure in Medellín was introduced with the influence of the private sector and was planned around the needs that would most benefit capitalist and neoliberal practices.

Through the above development of new infrastructures, one can begin to see the structural inequity beginning to manifest itself in Antioquia. As is apparent to the naked eye of any tourist that visits the city today, major infrastructure investments are funneled to the already affluent areas of El Poblado, Envigado, and Laureles, areas that are deemed high stratum. Residents in these areas do not receive subsidies for their utilities, but in exchange, they have perfectly manicured roads and functioning utility infrastructures. As a result, their properties appreciate in value, their children lead a relatively safe life filled with opportunities, and their neighbors serve as the human capital for their future job or business investment. The distribution of the city's infrastructure presents a framework of structural discrimination. The influence of the affluent people in the city and the incentive of the government to keep central areas safe in order to attract international investment unbalances the city's social dynamics. As Michelle Lamont points out: "social boundaries are often reproduced by members of the upper middle class through cultural repertoires."(Lamont and Molnar

2002) Thus these inequities are perpetuated and steepened by a small percentage of the population which makes up the middle class.

Under these uneven circumstances, the logic of the SES becomes obsolete. The idea behind the SES was to find a way for the government to identify members of society that needed the most support. As a result, the Colombian government invented a labeling mechanism for housing and a process in which it could funnel subsidies to the poor. However, the criteria for measuring SES, as was explained in Chapter One, includes characteristics of the infrastructure of the neighborhood. This historical section highlights how since the late 1800s, the distribution of public goods has been uneven. As a result, the people who have already been neglected by the government's uneven distribution of infrastructure now receive a small subsidy at the expense of no real infrastructural investment. From this perspective, the SES perpetuates the cycle of structural inequity. Furthermore, the label designed to target the population that needed the support has been transformed into an identity indicator which further complicates societal dynamics and hinders the opportunities for significant infrastructural change that would allow the ones who need it most to get out of the cycle of discrimination and lack of opportunity.

The implementation of utility infrastructure that favored a capitalist model was just the beginning of this unjust distribution. Between 1938 and 1951, Medellín's development was driven by a 1921 law called *Valorización*[34] and by the legal and

[34] Focused in bringing in capital gains

unofficial construction of spaces that have contributed to social and spatial segregation and the strengthening of the downtown area (Coupé 1993, 22). By the 1950s, the urban problems, including overpopulation, settlements that are not recognized by the state, and lack of wholesome utility infrastructure, required the support of the international financial sector. This financial support manifested itself as the Alliance for Progress (Coupé 1993, 24). As a result, capital investment arrived in Medellín in three major ways: 1) investment for industrialization purposes, 2) the improvement of public services (specifically drinking water and electricity) which supported industrialization, and 3) the introduction of the first major housing subsidy programs through the participation of *Instituto de Crédito Territorial* (Coupé 1993, 26). By the 1960s, Medellín was a full fletched neoliberal city where socio-spatial segregation was progressively more evident. To this day, the poorest members of society live in the north of the city and in the past decades have inhabited city peripheries (Coupé 1993, 31). Figure 37 below displays a population map of Medellín.

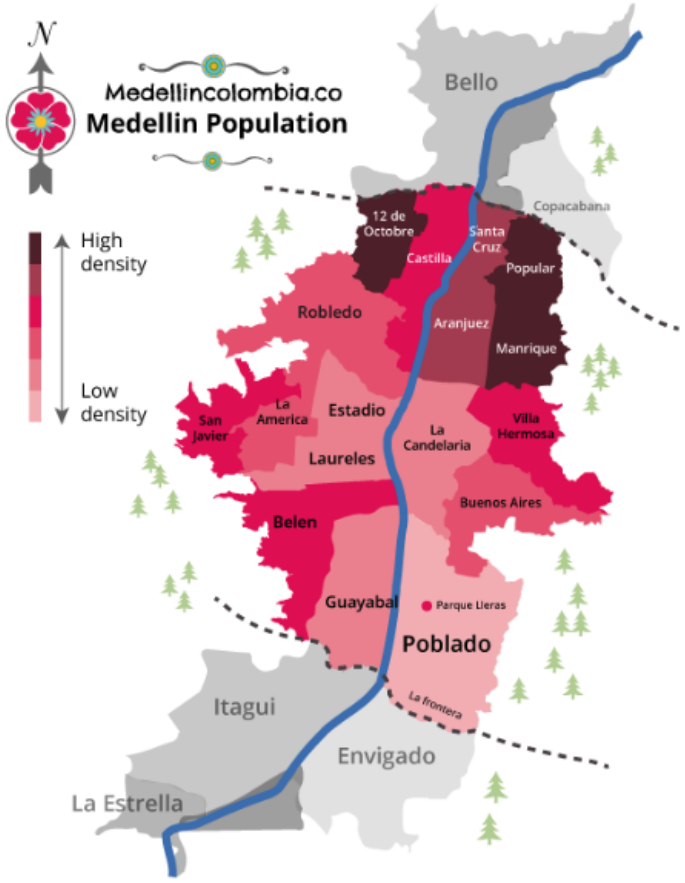
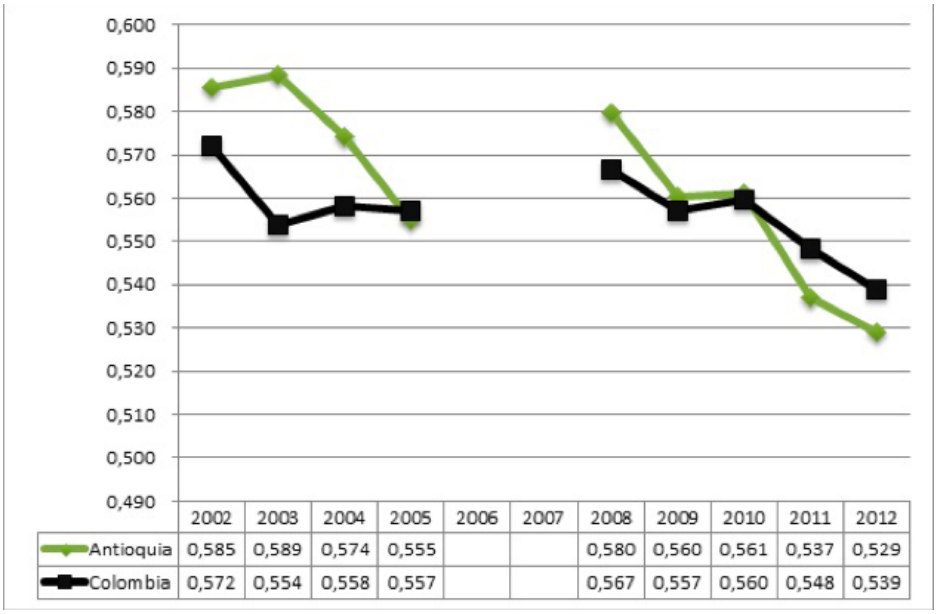



*Figure 36 ("Population of Medellin" 2017)*

**CURRENT STATE OF ANTIOQUIA**

Antioquia wouldn't have been able to industrialize if it wasn't for the mass migration and independent peasant work that was observed in the region. However, industrialization came at a very expensive price as *Antioqueño* society is now highly stratified. As can be observed in Figure 38, since the early 2000s, Antioquia has had a high Gini Coefficient and until 2010, the inequality indicator was higher than the national average.




| | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antioquia | 0,585 | 0,589 | 0,574 | 0,555 | | | 0,580 | 0,560 | 0,561 | 0,537 | 0,529 |
| Colombia | 0,572 | 0,554 | 0,558 | 0,557 | | | 0,567 | 0,557 | 0,560 | 0,548 | 0,539 |

*Figure 37 ("Estado de La Pobreza Y La Desigualdad En Antioquia" 2017)*

Most industrial activities, higher education institutions, research endowments for development, as well as population and income are concentrated in the metropolitan area of Medellín ("Medellín, En Infraestructura, Se Lució - El Mundo - Noticias de Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia Y El Mundo - Periódico El Mundo" 2015). Despite four centuries of isolation, Antioquia makes up a third of the population of Colombia, cultivates three-fourths of the coffee, and controls the majority of the industries and commerce ("Medellín, En Infraestructura, Se Lució - El Mundo - Noticias de Medellín, Antioquia, Colombia Y El Mundo - Periódico El Mundo" 2015, 32). However, industrialization and neoliberalism have shifted the dynamics of the region from an inclusive and relatively egalitarian society to a spatially segregated region where wealth disparities are continually reinforced. Currently, about 80 percent of the population in Medellín lives in the lower three strata (one, two, and three). Figure 39

breaks down the population by stratum, gender, and urban vs rural setting. The six categories of strata shown on the left of the graph are determined by the SES.

**Población según estrato socioeconómico de la vivienda**

| Estrato de la Vivienda | Hombres | Mujeres | Urbano | Rural | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Bajo bajo | 147.816 | 163.282 | 287.339 | 23.758 | **311.098** | 12,87 |
| 2. Bajo | 426.063 | 463.034 | 748.207 | 140.890 | **889.097** | 36,78 |
| 3. Medio bajo | 336.259 | 382.430 | 664.572 | 54.117 | **718.689** | 29,73 |
| 4. Medio | 111.427 | 124.594 | 234.840 | 1.180 | **236.021** | 9,76 |
| 5. Medio Alto | 72.174 | 95.129 | 166.281 | 1.022 | **167.303** | 6,92 |
| 6. Alto | 44.199 | 50.919 | 93.618 | 1.500 | **95.118** | 3,93 |
| **Total** | **1.137.937** | **1.279.388** | **2.194.857** | **222.467** | **2.417.325** | **100** |

Fuente: Encuesta de calidad de vida 2013 expandida, Medellín

*Figure 38 ("Perfil Socioeconómico de Medellín Encuesta Calidad de Vida 2013" 2013)*

Figure 40 provides a visual representation of the population of Medellín by stratum.


*Figure 39 ("Perfil Socioeconómico de Medellín Encuesta Calidad de Vida 2013" 2013)*

In Antioquia, the SES was introduced on a dynamic framework in which an egalitarian society was stratified with the arrival of industrialization, capitalism, and neoliberalism. The legacy of the land of opportunity developed a permanent identity of the *Antioqueño*; a hardworking, successful entrepreneur. This *Antioqueño* identity clashes with the new highly stratified society given that those who do not have access to

the same infrastructure, cannot claim that same *Antioqueño* identity. What I mean by this, is that those who lack access, and fall victims to structural inequity, do not exemplify the identity of the *Antioqueño* and thus loose agency. This contradiction of their identity is further complicated by their new identity adopted by the SES. As will be demonstrated in Chapter Five, respondents often use the SES to describe the concepts of richness and poorness. In turn, by identifying a person as poor based on the stratum of the household where they live, they are being robbed of their *Antioqueño* identity as they cannot be poor and successful hardworking individuals at the same time.

**Part C**

**OVERVIEW OF MAIN ELEMENTS THAT DETERMINE SOCIAL CLASS IN COLOMBIA**

So far, Part B of this chapter has outlined two important characteristics to understanding class in Colombia: 1) The regional myth of the Antioqueño as successful and hardworking and 2) Three important transnational repertoires a) industrialization, b) capitalism, and c) neoliberalism. Part C will offer an overview of the main elements that determine social class in Colombia. In order to do this, Part C will discuss the article *How We Got Here: The Transition of Colombia's Middle Class in Social Mobility Perspective* by Moreno et al.

This qualitative study by Moreno et al analyses the elements that determine social class in Colombia. This study points that there is confusion between the notion of social class and stratum among Colombians. There is a wide acceptance among the population regarding the public utility policy and it is used interchangeably with social class. This confusion or interchangeability of terms was also observed in scholars in

Chapter Two of this dissertation: *The Use of the SES in Colombia by Scholars*. The point of this study was to identify the main elements that determine social class in Colombia. In other words, the main symbolic boundaries that are key to forming groups of people who either belong to the upper middle class and high class or are outsiders. Moreno et. al conducted a qualitative study in which participants via a case study organized a set of cards. Each card represented a profile of a different person. The participants were split into groups and asked to organize the cards in a hierarchical order. Participants also partook in follow up interviews where they explained their reasoning behind the way they organized the cards. What Moreno et. al found was 1) four main determinants for belonging to a social class, 2) an analysis of class divisions and its forms of interactions, 3) the characteristics of the middle class, and 4) the channels on which social mobility occurs (Moreno, Ariza, and Uribe Mallarino 2017:3).

As mentioned above, the determinant elements for belonging to a social class according to Moreno at al. are 1) education level, 2) occupation, 3) geographical and public policy environment, and 4) capital endowment of the families of origin. Income was found to be important, but not as determinant of class unless linked to occupation. In turn, education is linked to occupation and income as it determines the network opportunities and access to specific occupations. Private educational institutions offer a higher likelihood to better job opportunities. Moreover, income is dependent on education level and quality as occupation is dependent on education level and quality. The interaction of education level and occupation is centered in the ability of a given individual to have social capital to seize opportunities. This is not limited to

opportunities that have been made available by the government vis-a-vis utility subsidies, it is also, and I argue more importantly through global opportunities for education and employment that oftentimes are tied to family of origin. Two additional observations are that people who live in rural areas are seen as belonging to a different category given the limited opportunities and likewise geographical area influences opportunities even within the same city (Moreno et al. 2017:4).


**Figure 1: Diagram of elements identified as determinants of social inequality in Colombia.**

*(Moreno et al. 2017:4) Figure 40 (González Díez 2021)*

When it comes to class division and its forms of interactions, Moreno et al. find that members of the same group display preferential treatment towards each other. Direct interactions generally only happen among people who share similar economic and educational conditions. The interaction among people who don't share similar economic and educational conditions is limited and typically occur through work or

market scenarios. However, the division of class is so stark in Colombia that oftentimes market scenarios vary depending on class and therefore it is rarely a space where members of different classes interact. When it comes to interactions within job settings, these interactions happen in a hierarchical setting in which some people work for others.

> In the identification of the national social landscape, Colombia is conceived as a society in which the differences are deeply marked among the classes. The lower classes would concentrate the most difficult social conditions and the least opportunities for access to full and quality education and jobs that provide stability, social security and sufficient economic income. For its part, the upper class would take advantage of opportunities, economic resources and also political power. Finally, the middle class would be characterized by being among the extremes of social stratification, but not in easy conditions, emphasizing that in order to be and remain in this social group its members must make a constant effort to be there and, often, have to borrow for achieve it. - (Moreno et al. 2017:5)

The middle-class in Colombia does not count with the social and economic stability that is often associated with the middle class in the United States and Europe. In Colombia, as in many other Latin American countries, members of the middle-class are often hanging on by a thread to maintain their middle-class status. They strive day by day to stay in the class; in some ways the middle class is vulnerable based on the conditions of the country, tax reforms, and job stability or availability of employment (Moreno et al. 2017:7). The family environment is of key importance to maintain status. Parents not only invest their saving in education for their children that was unattainable to them but will oftentimes acquire high amounts of debt in order to achieve that goal.

Thus, the project of being middle-class in Colombia is multigenerational. The middle-class is characterized by effort and sacrifice of parents to offer their children a better future. This oftentimes means that parents have to sacrifice their own goals and prioritize that of their children. Families aim to offer their children social capital opportunities that they did not have growing up. Families who make it to the middle-class generally are made up of less children than the generations before them. It is important to differentiate from this true middle class that was just described above, and the upper-middle class and high class that has been discussed earlier in this dissertation. The upper-middle class made up of a very small percentage of the total Colombian population is responsible for creating policies that don't center subaltern communities and for hoarding the majority of the resources.

According to Moreno et al., members of the middle class declare that they have no problems associating with the lower classes and highlighting values of solidarity, companionship, and mutual help. In contrast, members who belong to the upper class are generally represented as exerting social segregation and exclusion (Moreno et al. 2017:6). Through education members of the middle class are able to secure formal jobs with administrative roles and relatively high compensation. All of these jobs are in urban settings, thus Moreno et al claim that there is no middle class in rural settings.

These observations are confirmed through the semi-structured interviews conducted for this dissertation. Upper class participants in the study were on average more difficult to reach, unreliable in terms of starting on time, and distant when discussing members of other classes.

The middle class has had more years of education than the average citizen. Oftentimes, education took place in private institutions which members claim allows them to have better access to social capital. When it comes to political preference, middle class members generally support participatory democracy. Yet many are aware and name that there is no real democracy in Colombia as those who represent the people are not making decisions that benefit the majority. Self-interest by public officials, corruption, and a focus of benefiting the upper class is something members of the middle-class are deeply aware of. The middle class perceives the state as an actor who does not support the middle class and, on the contrary, hinders the middle class's ability to progress, particularly when looking at tax reform. When it comes to cultural consumption, the middle class has to save and be international in the kinds of activities that they partake in. These include travel, restaurants, movies, concerts and bars. Part of the narrative of the middle-class in Colombia is that members have reached such status due to their meritocracy, their hard work, effort and sacrifices. Finally, there is constant fear of losing said status due to economic opportunities and governmental decisions around taxes (Moreno et al. 2017:5).

Upward mobility is desired and yet families are often under constant threat of lower mobility. Upward mobility was defined through Moreno et al.'s study as being linked to 1) effort and entrepreneurship and 2) family and place of origin. As mentioned earlier, middle class is perceived as the destination that is reached after investing significant effort over time through education and hard work. Entrepreneurship enables

people to take initiative and seek and create opportunities. The spirit of entrepreneurship is at the forefront of *Antioqueño* identity.

The authors find that having family networks is fundamental to success within the family unit. Participants in the focus group shared that some of the sacrifices within families include offering education to one of the siblings while the other siblings work. This problematic offers additional depth into the understanding of the middle class and its precarious nature. There may be more than one social class accentuated within one family given access to education of different members within the unit. As such, access to family networks and support is paramount to maintain class status during precarious conditions. Moreover, place of birth is determinant of status. Those born in rural areas have less access to social capital, education, and jobs and thus lower incomes. Upward mobility was also linked to reduced number of children, access to leisure activities, neighborhood location with better access to education and better food. Another important determining factor of middle class is having a partner when raising a family.

These assessments come from observations and opinions of the participants of the study. Thus, this may reflect accuracy in terms of how Colombian society perceive who belongs and doesn't belong in the middle class. What this study does not take into consideration and is an incomplete story without it, is the impact that race, gender, and other axis of power have on the determinant elements of social class highlighted in this section. In Chapter Five, I will explore some of these axes of power as part of the analysis.

In sum, there are four important factors to determine social class in Colombia. They are 1) education level, 2) occupation, 3) geographical and public policy environment, and 4) capital endowment of the families of origin. These factors influence each other and are central to understanding the foundation from which the SES was then introduced in Colombia. The SES and social classes interact with one another in a web that is difficult to untangle, yet through understanding the origin of how these social determinants came about by studying the history of the region it will support in clarifying and further nuancing the complex project that it is to identify and assess class and identity in Colombia.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## METHODOLOGY, POSITIONALITY, AND IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS TO FRAME THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

**Chapter Four** offers important framing and insight into the methodology, my positionality, and considerations to keep in mind as interviews are unpacked and analyzed. This chapter will set the foundation from which to analyze the semi-structured interviews (31) that took place in Medellín, Colombia, in January 2017 to corroborate that the social trends perceived in scholars referenced in Chapter Two held true for the average citizen. On the next Chapter, (Five) the same research question that was explored in Chapter Two will be answered, this time analyzing the answers of the participants interviewed rather than scholars: **how has the SES categorization system transformed substantively from being a housing label to an identity-shaping tool used on individuals?** The second research question for this dissertation will also be analyzed in the next chapter: **Does the SES categorization system serve as symbolic boundaries that are reinforcing the hierarchy and exclusionary patterns of the country?** Before diving into these questions, Chapter Four will offer a needed foundation.

In the **First Section** of Chapter Four I discuss my positionality, subjectivity, and reflexivity as a researcher. In **Section Two**, I provide the theory of Critical Relativism from which I seek to appreciate the interpretations of social dynamics provided by respondents. In **Section Three,** I offer the methodology of conducting the semi-structured interviews and analyzing the data and close with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used.

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWING IN MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA

After the telling results gathered from secondary data in Chapter Two, I decided to delve deeper into the SES problematic by conducting an ethnographic study in Medellín, Colombia with the purpose of gaining a more profound understanding of the social implications of said system. I chose Medellín given my personal connection to the city (my parents, brother, and extended family live there), which allowed me the support of a wide network of people that provided connections to participants for the survey who resided in all six strata. Furthermore, I counted on the support of family members who assisted with the logistics of this project. Without this support it would have been difficult to realize the scope of the project of many reasons, in part due to a lack of resources and personal connections in other Colombian cities and because this project was not funded. Additionally, Medellín is the third biggest city in Colombia and the only one that has gone through all the stages of industrialization. I deemed these characteristics important given that I am analyzing a system that has an impact on the economy of the city and the social interactions of its citizens.

### SECTION ONE

### POSITIONALITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND REFLEXIVITY

I will locate my positionality in relation to my role as a researcher, the participants in the study, and the research context and process as suggested by Savin-Baden and Howell Major (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2017, 71). My positionality reflects the position I have chosen to adopt within this study, which is influenced by my worldviews. Worldviews in turn concern ontological assumptions- the nature of social

realities, or epistemological assumptions- the nature of knowledge, and assumptions about human nature and agency (Holmes 2017, 2).

I am a 32-year-old *mestiza* Colombian woman, born and raised in Bogotá D.C. until the age of twelve, when I moved to the United States. From then onwards, living in the United States has highly influenced my formal education, culture, and identity. Given the focus on socioeconomic interactions in this study, it is important to highlight my social position and that of my family's in Colombia. My parents live in *Los Colores*, the historically upper-middle-class neighborhood in Medellín where I performed many of the interviews. Some of the participants lived in the area, and others were in the neighborhood to work in different capacities including surveillance jobs, service jobs, and the ownership of local businesses.

Conducting most of the interviews in a stratum five neighborhood may have affected the interviews, given that people who live in lower strata may have felt more at ease if they had been interviewed in a neighborhood similar to their home environment. The general stratum of the neighborhood is stratum five; however, my family's apartment complex is classified as stratum four. This exception in the neighborhood, residents explain, is the result of having a government deputy living in the apartment complex who influenced officials in charge of labeling the SES stratum. This government deputy changed the stratum of his apartment complex as this change represented a financial stimulus for him and his neighbors.

The stratum inconsistencies are telling of another element that needs to be taken into consideration when studying the SES, which is the corruption within the

system. This topic will not be explored in detail, but it is important to keep it in mind when analyzing the ethnographic responses. The discrepancy in strata in my neighborhood came up a couple of times, but it did not seem to inhibit interactions among neighbors. However, based on their survey answers, it was present in the minds of the residents. Some respondents mentioned the stratum of their household, and then pointed out that the building across the street was a different stratum. In other instances, respondents talked about the stratum of their household but then mentioned that they did not consider themselves to be that same stratum. This interesting concept, they explained, was a result in the differences in education level and the way people behaved and carried themselves. Some residents saw their neighbors and felt that they upheld the identity of someone who lived in stratum five, but as they looked inward and noticed behavioral and educational differences, they decided that what this meant was that despite their household being stratum five, they identified more with residents who lived in housing stratum three or four.

Given the social dynamic of the local context, participants most likely assumed that I belonged to the same socioeconomic status as those living in *Los Colores*. My affiliation with a U.S. university, and the fact that I was coming from the U.S. to perform this study, elevated my status and affected the interaction with the participants. From one perspective, I was an insider. This angle may have made people defensive about their answers based on my observations of the social dynamics in Colombia of keeping up with appearances and upholding a positive reputation. From another perspective, I was an outsider coming from the U.S., providing a consent form, which promised

privacy, and offering a North American presence. This status perhaps allowed participants to explore the questions further with less fear of upholding their appearances. This position of insider-outsider posed advantages for understanding the local context and social dynamics while at the same time presenting the work in a professional and removed context from the local intricacies of social interactions.

"In ethnography...a major goal of the research process is self-reflexivity – what we learn about the self as a result of the study of the 'other'" (Chiseri-Strater 1996). Throughout my field research in Colombia, I was aware of the insider/outsider dynamic, which influenced my behavior. I made sure to read the consent form orally to each participant, display the audio recorder, and reassure participants of the professional and discrete nature of this study.

I found myself dressing casually when interviewing participants who lived in lower socioeconomic strata with the hopes of putting them at ease in a more relaxed setting. With the hopes of projecting high status, I dressed more formally when interviewing participants who lived in higher socioeconomic strata, which I thought would grant me respect and access.

After the first round of interviews, I decided to add the following line to the instructions of the interview: "This interview seeks to gauge people's perceptions and opinions. No answer is right or wrong, thus, the purpose of this study is not to learn facts about the SES but rather to learn how Colombians see it." The above clarification was added to the script for two reasons: 1) I noticed that generally participants who lived in the three lowest SES often asked for approval of their answers, asking

something along the lines of “am I right?” at the end of their responses; and 2) I also noticed that participants who lived in the three higher strata often answered questions with authority, assuming they possessed the truth. Some also maintained an attitude of power and even condescension, as if I did not understand how the SES system worked. By adding the above line to the script, I attempted to control the above phenomena.

Examining my intersectionality in broader terms, I am a white passing Colombian who’s highly educated. My story, like most, is complex and contradicting. I would describe my family as part of that middle class that was described earlier by Moreno et. al. A middle class in which my parents had to make many sacrifices in order to ensure that my brothers and I had a privileged education. Despite those challenges, my family and I also benefitted from white supremacist tropes given our complexion and access to cheap labor which granted us the occasional trip to the hair salon or the monthly housekeeping visit, among other uneven power dynamics. My family also had the resources to move to the United States when we were threatened by security issues, as a result of the civil war that plagued Colombia for over 6 decades.

I turned 13 years old the month after I arrived in this country. My parents quickly found ways to support our family after the move; my mom cleaned houses and my dad worked at FedEx loading boxes into the planes. Soon after arriving in the United States, I lost legal status and later learned that I could no longer leave the country to visit my loved ones in Colombia. I remained undocumented for 6 years. In addition to the normal pre-teen and teenage struggles, I also spent those years navigating my legal status, learning English, and assimilating to my new culture. During those 6 years I experienced

racism, stigmatization, and felt othered. In short, we experienced what it was like to not belong.

I am proud of my hard work in that period of my life, and through my hard work and academic merit I was able to obtain college scholarships. I am particularly proud because I did this without the generational support of applying to college. Although my dad does have a bachelor's degree from Colombia, he was unable to help me navigate the higher education process in the United States.

While it is true and important to acknowledge that I was able to afford community college, undergraduate school, and graduate school with merit scholarships due to my dedication, it is just as important to name the circumstances that allowed for that to happen. I was able to obtain documentation just in time to enter undergraduate school and thus qualify for Pell grants and other scholarships that I otherwise would not have access to. It must be said that living in the United States granted me many more opportunities that, through no fault of my own, I would not have found if I had stayed in Colombia. Thus, my circumstances were important determinants of my outcome.

My move to the United States and the stigmatization and lack of belonging I experienced was crucial to my antiracist journey. Even though I experienced micro aggressions, and sometimes blatant racism, I also recognize that given my intersectionality what I experienced (and sometimes still experience) pales in comparison to what others have to experience given the color of their skin. I recognize that the R factor is crucial to recognize and take into consideration in all aspects of life.

When interacting with participants in this study, I was aware of the axes of power and the many ways in which one needs to center the experiences of Black and Indigenous individuals as well as individuals with other identities that are oppressed.

## SECTION TWO

### THEORY OF CRITICAL RELATIVISM

The process of asking questions and gathering insider accounts in this section is conducted from a critical realist perspective, which recognizes the significance of meaning construction and the importance of communicating with human subjects. Similar to positivism, it assumes a world independent of people's perceptions of it, but this knowledge can only be accessed through people's subjectivity (Edwards and Holland 2013, 32). Even though reality cannot be fully accessible to people, through interviews and personal accounts researchers can get closer to the understanding of culture. Critical realism highlights the value of the interviewer and the importance of negotiated dialogue at every step of the way (Edwards and Holland 2013, 33).

Through the realist perspective ethnographic findings cannot be taken at face value and "alternative interpretations of processes can be explicated and subjected to critical scrutiny" (Smith and Elger 2012, 10). Although interview answers should not be taken at face value, they should also not be taken for granted as they suggest an understanding of the points of view of the respondents. This research was performed with the understanding that social action takes place in a context of pre-existing social relations and structures (Smith and Elger 2012, 6). In this way, through interviewing, this chapter seeks to appreciate the interpretations of social dynamics and the

socioeconomic stratification system in Colombia of the informants in order to analyze the social context, and strengths and weaknesses within the framework of the informants.

**SECTION THREE**

**METHODOLOGY OF CONDUCTING THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

I conducted the following ethnographic study between January 9and January 23, 2017 in Medellín, Colombia. The methodology consisted of 31 semi-structured interviews conducted in Spanish. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board under the project name: "The Socioeconomic Stratification System in Colombia" and with the authorization number: 989685-1. My goal was to have each stratum represented five times to have substantial representation across the board. An additional interview was conducted with the participation of a displaced war victim who does not have a dwelling; she considers herself to belong to stratum zero even though "stratum zero" is not an official classification. Figure 43 shows the number of interviews that were conducted per stratum.

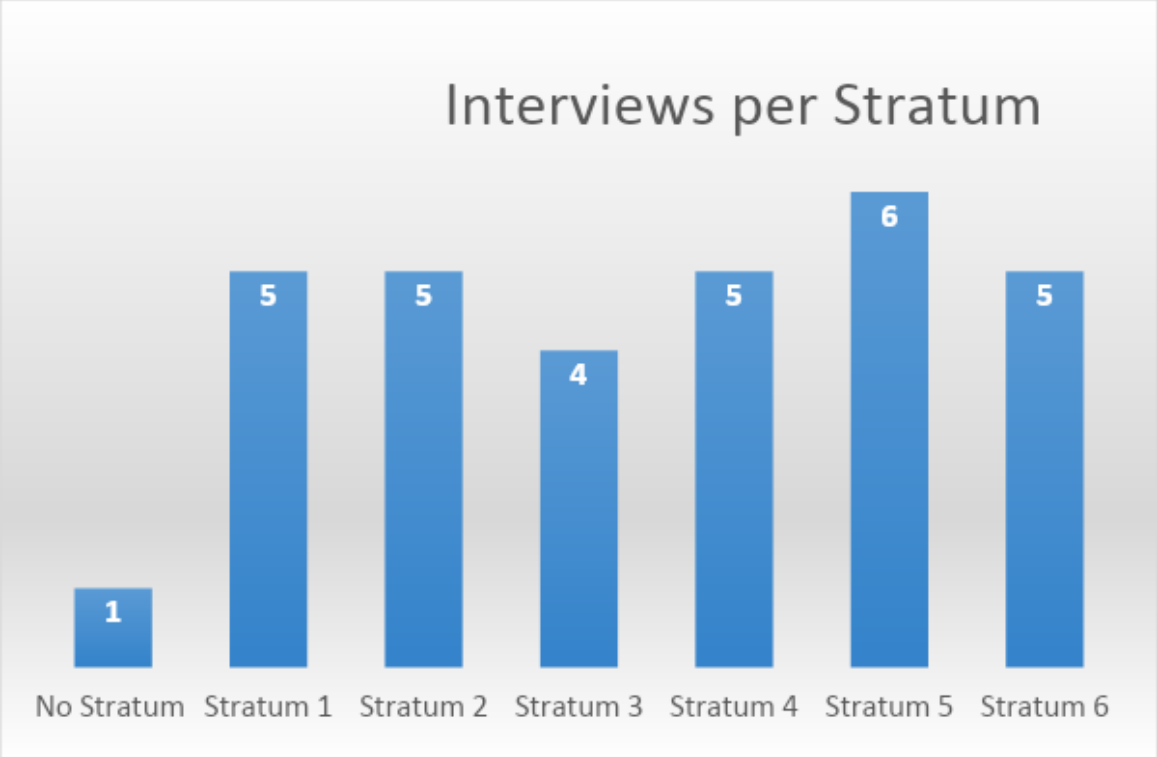



*Figure 41*

The sample was made up of Colombian adults, both men and women, who lived in Medellín at the time of the study. The support of family and friends was key to finding the first informants who then referred other possible candidates to the interview; this technique is also known as the "snowball effect." Figure 44 shows the ratio of male to female participants in the study.

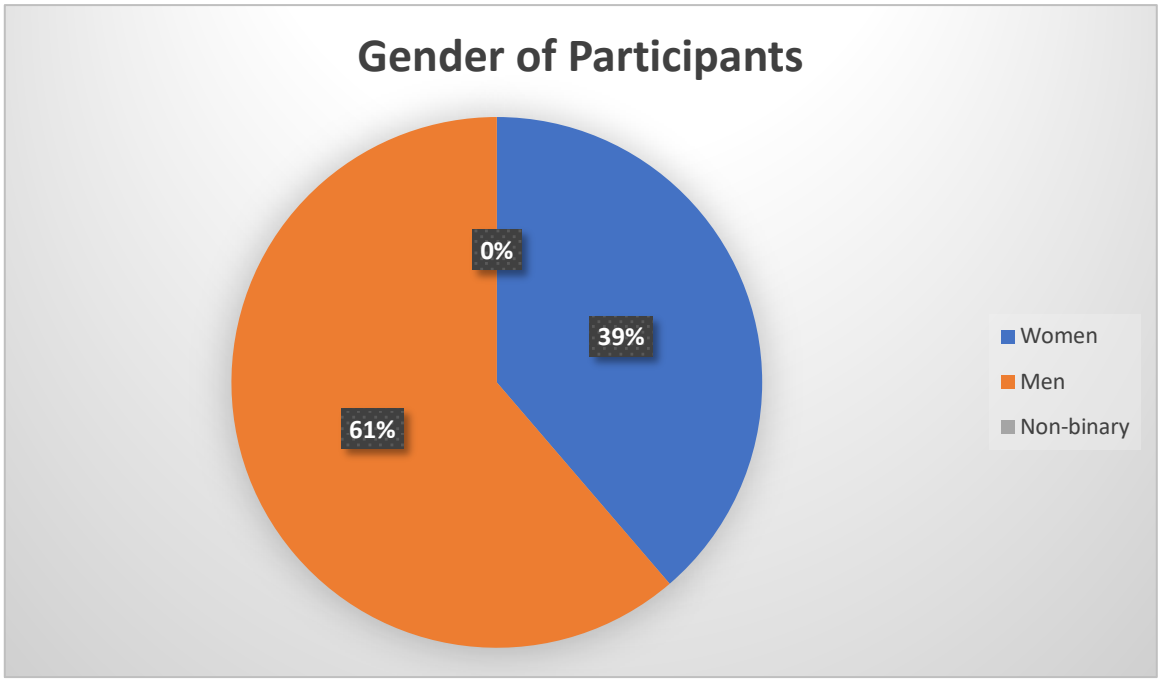



*Figure 42*

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 10 and 25 minutes. This differed from the anticipated time of 30 to 45 minutes given the nature of the first half of the script, which asked demographic and simple questions that prompted short responses. Thus, time allowed for more than two interviews per day as originally planned, and as a result, I was able to conduct up to six interviews in one day. Methodologically, this advantage was instrumental given the unexpected difficulty in reaching participants who lived in housing catalogued as stratum six. Despite a significant network who lived in housing stratum five, participants who lived in stratum six were relatively difficult to access compared to the rest of the informants. Furthermore, two referrals who lived in stratum six declined to participate in the study. These were the only two denials throughout the study. Despite the interviews lasting less than a half hour, three of the five participants from stratum six required more time given that they had to be

interviewed at their preferred location. One participant delayed their interview three hours after the appointment time. The difference in attitudes among participants living in stratum six merits further analysis.

Before each interview, I read a consent form out loud in Spanish to each participant. I then handed out two copies, one for the participant to keep and one to sign and return. Afterwards, I displayed and turned on a voice recorder to begin the interview. Based on facial expressions, general demeanor, and attitude of the participants, I deemed that the voice recorder, official consent form, and affiliation with a North American university lent legitimacy and importance to the project.

I then transcribed the semi-structured interviews and included observational data in order to create domains. The domains helped yield factors that were identified because they appeared repeatedly in the data. Some of the domains that appeared after conducting the interviews were not on my radar beforehand. An example of this is the importance that Colombians place in owning property in specific locations of the city as a determining factor of wealth and status. Another example is the difference in how people who live in low strata define “low-class” compared to people who live in high strata, who provide a different definition of the same term.

> Wimmer (2008) suggests that actors and groups generally redraw boundaries either to exclude or include others or modify boundaries by challenging existing hierarchies, redefining positions within existing hierarchies, or by emphasizing different forms of belonging. (Guetzkow and Fast 2016:152)

Through the semi-structured interviews, participants answered questions related to clues that were observed in the preliminary data, such as: how widespread is the SES

in people's consciousness? What are the differences in the ways people who live in low strata understand the system in comparison with people who live in high strata? Semi-structured interviews were constructed around these factors and subfactors (Schensul 1999, 154).

The order of the questions of the semi-structured interview matters given that it may influence the responses. I asked questions in order of abstraction within domain, meaning from the most concrete to the most abstract. Simultaneously, I provided the questions more or less in accordance with the risk level, from the least sensitive to the most sensitive. I asked demographic questions at the beginning of the interview omitting the question: "Do you remember what socioeconomic stratum was the housing where you lived when you were growing up, and is that the same stratum of your current household?" I asked this question towards the end of the interview after discussing social class, the stratification system, and social dynamics.

I created this design with the intention of allowing the respondents to feel as comfortable as possible while sharing their opinion without polluting answers with their active awareness of their own stratum. However, this posed the problem of encouraging respondents to lie about their stratum after they had shared their opinion on the stratification system and social dynamics given that they may have felt guilty acknowledging their household stratum based on their previous responses. As a measurement to counter the potential corrupted answer of self-identifying their household stratum, the responses could be crossed checked with the address and neighborhood that they had provided in the beginning of the interview which can

indicate socioeconomic stratum. To complicate matters further, at the time of the interview I more or less knew the household stratum of the respondent given the context in which they were recruited for the interview. For example, if they were referred by a neighbor, there was a good chance that they lived in a dwelling of the same stratum as the person who referred them.

**METHODOLOGY OF ANALYZING THE DATA**

I analyzed the semi-structured interviews in five steps, as suggested by McCracken (1988). The first stage was to read the transcript carefully, making notations in the margins. These notes were short phrases that captured what the interviewees discussed during the interview. Stage two was when I developed observations into interpretative and evidentiary categories that were present in the interview. During this stage, observations made during the first step were developed and explored further. Observations were compared among transcripts to see if there was a pattern within the whole study. To achieve this goal, I used the computer based program atlas.ti to enter, organize, and code data. Stage three consisted of analyzing the codes previously logged into the computer to try to find connections and develop patterns. Figure 45 depicts the 36 codes identified, and the frequency that each term was coded.

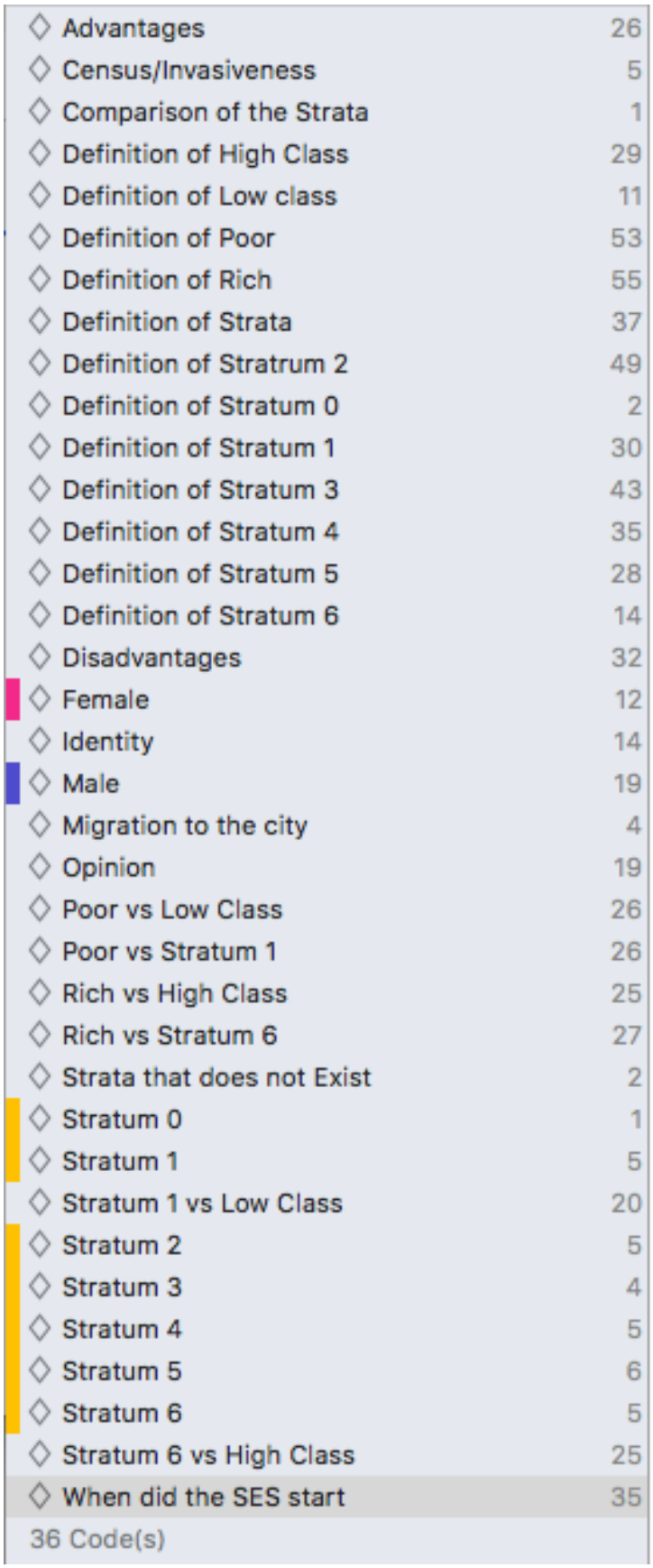

Advantages 26
Census/Invasiveness 5
Comparison of the Strata 1
Definition of High Class 29
Definition of Low class 11
Definition of Poor 53
Definition of Rich 55
Definition of Strata 37
Definition of Stratrum 2 49
Definition of Stratum 0 2
Definition of Stratum 1 30
Definition of Stratum 3 43
Definition of Stratum 4 35
Definition of Stratum 5 28
Definition of Stratum 6 14
Disadvantages 32
Female 12
Identity 14
Male 19
Migration to the city 4
Opinion 19
Poor vs Low Class 26
Poor vs Stratum 1 26
Rich vs High Class 25
Rich vs Stratum 6 27
Strata that does not Exist 2
Stratum 0 1
Stratum 1 5
Stratum 1 vs Low Class 20
Stratum 2 5
Stratum 3 4
Stratum 4 5
Stratum 5 6
Stratum 6 5
Stratum 6 vs High Class 25
When did the SES start 35
36 Code(s)

*Figure 43*

Stage four focused on developing clusters based on respondents' comments that I had noted previously. At this point, I used a development of a coding scheme on atlas.ti to identify patterns in the data. This facilitated the visualization of patterns in both horizontal and vertical patterns. Finally, stage five focused on delineating predominant themes. This enabled the organization of and responses to the original research questions of the study (Piercy 1998, 3).

As observed in Figure 45 above, the semi-structured interviews yielded a wealth of important domains that should be explored in detail. In order to provide an intentional and focused thesis, this chapter will only explore two main aspects that will be extracted from these codes: 1) the way respondents define richness and poorness focusing on the influences of the SES and 2) the ways in which the SES influences people's identities and social interactions explored via respondents' understanding of the SES and their opinions of it. These two sets of data are the most important to explore in this thesis given that they prove the following statement: "the SES has altered the way Colombian citizens think about themselves and others." The interviews yielded additional valuable data that should and will be explored in the future through my dissertation.

**STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE METHODS**

Qualitative interviews may sacrifice standardization, but they obtain a more complete development of information. This is true of this study, which is composed of a small N (31) given the ambitious scope of the study. However, this qualitative work has

also produced quantifiable data as a result of engaging in a coding procedure to achieve this goal. Another weakness in interviewing is the uncertain relationships between talk and action (Smith and Elger 2012, 10). In this case, the discrepancy between talk and action can be observed in how people see and talk about themselves, as well as the way they treat, talk, and potentially discriminate against others.

However, interviewing also provides significant strengths, as it generates access to specific forms of information and opinions that otherwise would not be easily gathered. For example, the interviews shined light on specific nuances that had not been mentioned in the literature. These included recording ethnographic accounts on peoples' perspectives of their social situation in Medellín in 2017 and alternative lines of action that participants see as ways the government could approach subsidy distribution and labeling mechanisms. Other examples include that many people first learned about the SES when they migrated into the city from rural areas and the difference in perceptions and understandings of the SES based on the household strata of respondents. Provided below is a study of respondents' definition of richness and poorness through an SES lens.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## THE SES AS SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES; A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Finally, we have arrived at the most exciting chapter of the dissertation, the chapter in which semi-structured interview answers will be shared and important connections and conclusions will be made. Before getting into the nitty gritty, let's back up to review the main purpose of this dissertation. When I started researching this topic, I was curious about the SES because it is a very unique system in the world and one in which I perceived strong adaptation by Colombians. I was not sure exactly why this mattered. So what if people use a number interchangeably with class? My analysis of the SES started when I became a graduate student five years ago. Since then, I have completed my Master of Arts in Latin American Studies and have been working as the Executive Director for Bard Early College in New Orleans for the past two and a half years while still writing. The experiences I gained working with New Orleans youth and having access to a very progressive community have been more relevant to this dissertation than one may think.

I have had the privilege of working with Black and Brown High School juniors and seniors who are taking college courses through Bard. One could argue that these students in many ways are set up to fail in a system that does not center them, a system that often blames them for structural issues beyond their control. Students at Bard defy many odds, they are brilliant, resilient, and are deserving members of society who unfortunately have to jump many hoops to attain the same opportunities than other more privileged members.

In our current society, even in many progressive spaces, we (collectively) have a hard time acting in a way consistent with our understanding of systemic oppression. That concept is generally accepted by many, yet our actions do not reflect that. Depending on our role in society that may look like simply placing blame on individuals and failing to see the systemic issues at play in a given situation. That could also look like not enacting policies that take into consideration peoples' unfair disadvantages to work towards a more equitable society. It could look like not centering subaltern experiences when analyzing the success of a policy. This matters because it is only after we shift our mindset to truly take into consideration the impact of systemic issues that we will be able to change and become a more equitable society.

It has been through my current job that I have gained important clarity and insight into why I have been attracted to the SES to begin with. What drives me as a professional, a scholar, and overall member of society is a pursuit for equity. I was intrigued by the SES because I wondered about its social implications. I noticed there was not enough research looking into the social impact and wanted to contribute to the literature in that way. Why aren't we asking how a system impacts its very people that is meant to serve? The analysis of the SES in Colombia covers disciplines that include economics, political science, and health. Consuelo Uribe-Mallarino is one scholar who has begun to scratch the surface when exploring the social impact of the SES. When researching redistributive programs globally, I observed the same trend.

Understanding the financial implications of the SES is of course important. But what about the people who are subject to being identified with a number? These

everyday Colombians who find themselves using this number to either demonstrate their worth or to give an explanation as to why that number does not represent them seem to be the experts on this topic. Why is it that we are not asking them how the SES is affecting them?

In academia we often reference expert voices to ground our research. Repeatedly, we lose sight of very important stakeholders who are the true experts in their own experiences. This happens because we draw symbolic boundaries and generate discrete definitions of who belongs in academia and who is a voice of authority. This all ties together to the same idea that I referenced earlier about the need to shift our mindset to truly see how systemic issues affect our society, this includes academia. **My goal with my dissertation is to help recalibrate the framework and focus from which many conversations about redistributive programs start.** As scholars and knowledge producers, we have a responsibility to assess equity and critically examine policies and systems. If the point of a redistributive system is to "even out" society and expand access for all; what good do we do if we are ignorant to the impact that said system is having socially on the people is supposed to serve?

The pursuit for equity does not only benefit the subaltern; it benefits everyone. People in positions of power also suffer because of imbalances in our society. Those challenges of course don't compare to the plight of the oppressed, yet it is significant and adds to general unrest and the perpetuation of societal problems. For example, the rich in Colombia are very preoccupied with their safety. This has direct consequences on their well-being as they live in fear and occupy much of their mental space looking for

ways to alleviate their concerns. They often opt into paying for their own private security, something that they wouldn't have to do if they lived in an equitable society. **The central problem with the SES is that 1) it serves as a categorization system that offers discrete boundaries from which society can and does discriminates between groups and that 2) it serves as a tool to reiterate and reinforce other existing symbolic boundaries.** This phenomenon further defines people, making the categories of belonging or not belonging more profound.

As Michele Lamont states:

> Preventing the over-homogenization or a domination of a narrow definition of worth or cultural membership is essential for collective wellbeing.(Lamont and Molnar 2002)

What we encounter in the Colombian case through the SES is that the government emphasizes the importance of discrete categories that define people (even though it is supposed to define households) in an over-simplified way. There are both social and symbolic ways in which defining society as lower or upper class automatically signals who belongs, who is a contributing member of society, and who does not belong and is acting as a burden on society that needs "help" from those "above." In order for Colombia to foster an inclusive society there needs to be a change in the narrative, a cultural shift, and a different way to distribute resources in a way that is more equitable and less harmful for its people.

The framework that Michel Lamont provided and that I included in Chapter Three is helpful in order to understand the impact that belonging has on being accepted and having opportunities and thus receiving access to a successful and dignified life. In

Colombia, through the interviews I conducted it became evident that there are two groups of people: those who belong and align to the cultural narrative of being a good citizen and those who don't belong and are perceived as less-deserving individuals. These distinctions, of course, are very nuanced. There are many identities at play that interact with this notion of belonging such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status among others. Peoples' identities are important determinants in the belonging framework and play a role in different levels of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw offers a relevant framework of intersectionality which helps understand said dynamics. This framework was also outlined in Chapter Three. While this work can be messy as it is more abstract than, say, the economic benefits of the program, we are missing key information by staying away from these important qualitative questions.

When I think about students at Bard, I see how the system is set up to fail them. They consistently are not given the same opportunities by the state and society as students who have lighter skin and live in more affluent areas. The students who attend the Bard program have excelled academically among their peers at their high schools and are perceived as high achievers. It is easy for people to look at them and use them as an example of meritocracy. If they are successful enough to be at the top of their high school class and get into Bard, why couldn't their peers do the same? That narrative of meritocracy was introduced and continues to be upheld by transnational repertoires like industrialization, capitalism, and neoliberalism. It is harmful, it takes away the focus from the fundamental problem (inequitable distribution of resources), and it centers individuals when placing blame (the students who are able to achieve against all odds).

There cannot be equity when we have systems in place that both misrepresent the reality of our access and serves to reinforce the status quo. As a society, we need to change the lens from which we assess people and systems.

One aspect of access and equity that is not always understood is the impact that having a more equitable society would have on outcomes for everyone. For example, when thinking about my students and their brilliance, I often think about how generally in the ivory tower of higher education there are so many voices and life experiences that are missing from those spaces. This presents real-life consequences as those voices would bring innovative, insightful, and relevant expertise to help create a better version of our society. Yet there are so many forms of symbolic boundaries that it is difficult to recognize what would be important benefits for all. These boundaries hinder access, inclusivity, and the prospect of a society where all of its members have a strong sense of belonging.

The Colombian SES case is one that fosters divisions and exacerbates symbolic violence. It is undeniable that the SES has become a frame of reference and additional tool to assess whether a person belongs or not. The concern with this is that it provides a framework from which Colombian society continue to maintain the status quo.

This chapter will focus on the second question of this dissertation: **How does the SES categorization system serve as symbolic boundaries that are reinforcing the hierarchy and exclusionary patterns of the country?** Moreover, as this question is answered, it is inevitable for the first research question to also be answered and reinforce the original findings of Chapter Two. That research question was: **How has the**

**SES categorization system transformed substantively from a housing label into a class marker of the identity of an individual?**

To this end, Chapter Five will be organized in three main sections. Each section is a form of cultural repertoire category that helps define class in *Antioquia*. These were explored at length in Chapter Three. They include 1) the Regional Myth of Belonging, 2) Transnational Repertoires, and 3) the Cultural Myth of belonging. This chapter will be organized as follows:

**Section One** will examine how the narrative of the regional myth of the *Antioqueño* overlaps with the SES. Furthermore, it will discuss how the SES reinforces aspects of the regional myth. Within this narrative, the focus will be on paternalism. How does paternalism show up in the context of the SES and what are the implications of it?

**Section Two** will examine the three transnational repertoires central to this dissertation: industrialization, neoliberalism, and capitalism. These themes were discussed at length in Chapter Three. In this section these themes will be highlighted using examples that have come out of the semi-structured interviews. It will be explored how the themes intersect with the SES by using real life examples of how they show up and are understood by Colombians. Additionally, I will explore the significance of such finding by understanding how the SES and the three themes highlighted here intersect and reinforce symbolic boundaries. What these three transnational repertoires have in common is the systemic issues that they reinforce and that align with the SES. The systemic issues of focus for this section include meritocracy, discrimination, and biases.

**Section Three** will examine the cultural myth of belonging focusing on the four most

prominent symbolic boundaries in Colombia which include 1) education level and quality, 2) family environment (economic, social & cultural capital), 3) occupation and income, and 4) policy framework and geographic differences. These four symbolic boundaries also show up through the SES. In this section I will provide example of this.

It will become clear that there is a dire need for approaching redistributive systems like the SES from a different framework. The focus needs to be on centering subaltern voices, making decisions that are not driven by an undercurrent of harmful transnational repertoires but rather by both grass-roots work and a national push to create a narrative of inclusivity, an understanding of intersectionality, and an acknowledgement of the real impact that systemic issues of oppression have on outcomes for different members of society. Below is an outline of this chapter.

1) Regional Myth
    a. Paternalism
2) Transnational Repertoires (Industrialization, Capitalism, Neoliberalism)
    a. Systemic Issues
        i. Meritocracy
        ii. Discrimination
        iii. Biases
3) Cultural Myth of Belonging
    a. Education level and quality
    b. Family Environment (economic, social & cultural capital)
    c. Occupation and Income
    d. Policy Framework and Geographic Differences

## SECTION ONE

### THE REGIONAL MYTH

The *Antioqueño* narrative is foundational to the understanding of class in the region. To be an *Antioqueño* is to be a successful businessman, hardworking, and

honorable. In order to be a successful businessman in capitalist terms, one must be financially successful. Thus, only those who belong to the middle or upper class are considered financially successful and thus included in the definition of the *Antioqueño*. The problem with the Antioqueño narrative is that it leaves out an enormous group of people who in turn become stigmatized. The lack of cultural membership of those who don't fit the definition of an *Antioqueño* is problematic as it not only generates stigmatization but also causes poverty. As Peter A Hall and Michèle Lamont put it:


*Figure 44 (González Díez 2021) (Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont 2013)*

The cultural repertoires that are available to people in *Antioquia* by virtue of the narrative that has been constructed are embedded in various social relations which enhance the capacity of those who belong to sustain their well-being. Upper middle-class members tend to control the allocation of valuable resources. They are able to do this because they have cultural membership which grants them access to resources and power. Cultural categories become important when they are repeatedly defended by

members of the inner group. This section will demonstrate how *Antioqueños* engage with these cultural categories. The exclusionary cultural differences that come out of the *Antioqueño* narrative exacerbate inequality. Inequality is not only defined as having access to unequal resources, but also as a lack of recognition. Nancy Fraser in the book *Redistribution or Recognition? A political-Philosophical Exchange*, defines recognition as follows:

> The term 'recognition,"…comes from Hegelian philosophy, specifically the phenomenology of consciousness. In this tradition, recognition designates an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects in which each sees each other as its equal and also as separate from it. This relation is deemed constitutive for subjectivity; one becomes an individual subject only in virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject. Thus, 'recognition' implies the Hegelian thesis, often deemed at odds with liberal individualism, the social relations are prior to individuals and intersubjectivity is prior to subjectivity. (Fraser and Honneth 2003:10)

Those who fit into the *Antioqueño* definition belong and are recognized as such. Those who don't, experience an identity juxtaposition. The lack of recognition as a dignified member of society who belongs has real life consequences. Individuals borrow from the *Antioqueño* cultural repertoires to reproduce and reinforce symbolic boundaries. People don't only experience stigmatization from those who identify with the Antioqueño cultural categories but also within their own communities and within themselves as these narratives are so deeply rooted in the local culture.

This section demonstrates how the *Antioqueño* narrative is ever present in the consciousness of its people. As respondents made sense of the SES, they drew on cultural repertoires that are central to the regional myth. The following cultural categories will be explored by drawing answers from the interviews: paternalism,

meritocracy, and morality. All of these categories deeply contribute to the creation and reinforcement of symbolic boundaries that propagate discrimination.

**How was the Regional Myth Created?**

Chapter Three offers a comprehensive overview of how the Antioqueño narrative emerged and was reinforced. Since colonial times, the Antioqueño society developed a strong identity narrative for the region. This narrative yielded notions and feelings of unity and community associated with the region that they occupied (Arcila Estrada 2016, 43). This narrative was built on a foundation of promoting civilization, an important component of the colonizing rhetoric. Civilization carried the connotation of culture and domestication. In a geographical context, through hard work, the *Antioqueño* transformed the natural into the civilized (Arcila Estrada 2016, 53). The civilized is then associated with institutionalization and control of the territory and the resources. This section provides a quick overview before exploring how paternalism, meritocracy, and morality (all serving as symbolic boundaries), are woven into the fabric of the understanding of the SES. The chart below depicts the overview of the progression in which the regional myth developed.

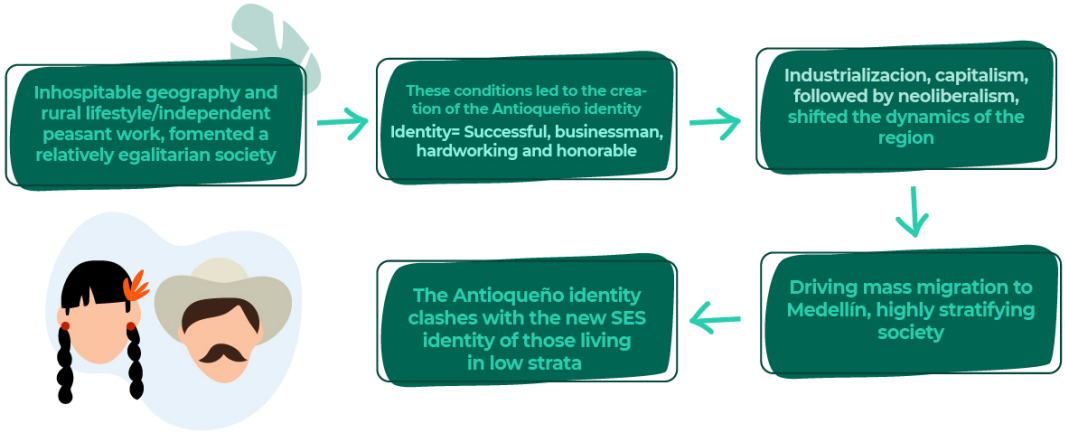


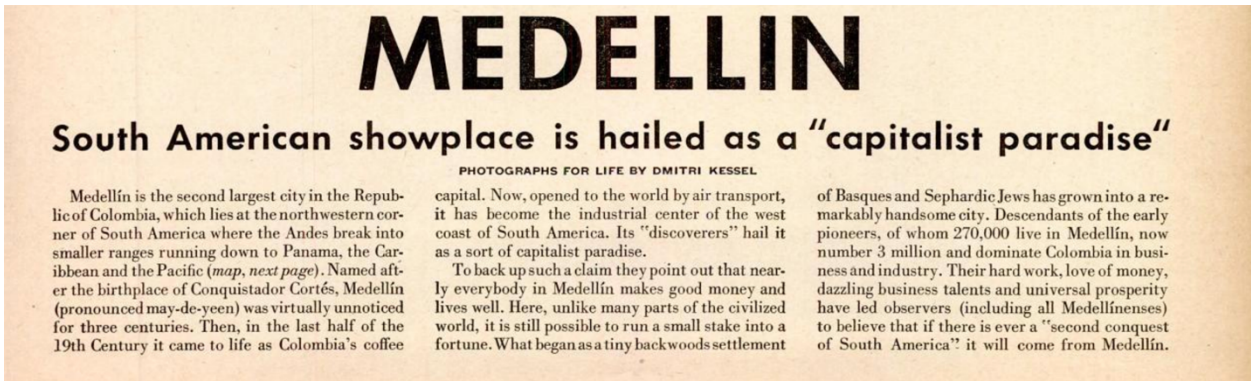

*Figure 45 (González Díez 2021)*

The inhospitable land fomented a relatively egalitarian society which allowed economic prosperity and independence, a phenomenon not seen in other parts of the country. These conditions led to the creation of the Antioqueño narrative (successful businessman, hardworking, and honorable). With the arrival of transnational repertoires like industrialization, capitalism, and neoliberalism came a shift in the region. Mass migration was driven into Medellín to support the industrialization process. Over time, Antioquia became a highly stratified society.

*Antioqueñidad* is a source of pride within the region. To be an *Antioqueño* is to belong and to be respected. This important regional narrative is foundational to people's identity. How is this identity reified, reiterated or impeded by the SES? In this section it will become clear that the SES reifies the *Antioqueño* identity for those who identify as living in high SES uplifting their status and reiterating their legitimacy and sense of belonging. In contrast, people who live in low SES phase a juxtaposition as they identify as *Antioqueños*, yet the narrative associated with living in low SES directly

contrasts the narrative of the *Antioqueño*. Thus, the SES impedes members who live in low SES to identify and feel like they belong to the Antioqueño identity.

On September 29th, 1947 correspondent and photographer Dmitri Kessel discussed the *Antioqueño* narrative in an article in Life Magazine. He was evidently dazzled by the city's industrialists and their modern yet fervently catholic lifestyle.



# MEDELLIN

## South American showplace is hailed as a "capitalist paradise"

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR LIFE BY DMITRI KESSEL

Medellín is the second largest city in the Republic of Colombia, which lies at the northwestern corner of South America where the Andes break into smaller ranges running down to Panama, the Caribbean and the Pacific (*map, next page*). Named after the birthplace of Conquistador Cortés, Medellín (pronounced may-de-yeen) was virtually unnoticed for three centuries. Then, in the last half of the 19th Century it came to life as Colombia's coffee capital. Now, opened to the world by air transport, it has become the industrial center of the west coast of South America. Its "discoverers" hail it as a sort of capitalist paradise.

To back up such a claim they point out that nearly everybody in Medellín makes good money and lives well. Here, unlike many parts of the civilized world, it is still possible to run a small stake into a fortune. What began as a tiny backwoods settlement of Basques and Sephardic Jews has grown into a remarkably handsome city. Descendants of the early pioneers, of whom 270,000 live in Medellín, now number 3 million and dominate Colombia in business and industry. Their hard work, love of money, dazzling business talents and universal prosperity have led observers (including all Medellínenses) to believe that if there is ever a "second conquest of South America" it will come from Medellín.

*Figure 46 (Kessel 1947:110)*

He states: "Its "discoverers[35]" hail it as a sort of capitalist paradise. To back up such a claim they point out that nearly everybody in Medellín makes good money and lives well"(Kessel 1947:110). This generalizing claim demonstrates how even to the foreign eye, there was a strong sense of regional identity which was homogenized, and it included a simple definition of success: "nearly everybody in Medellín makes good money and lives well." These claims leave out many members of society.

Moreover, there is an implicit racialized representation as part of Kessel's understanding of the regional identity. "What began as a tiny backwoods settlement of Basques and Sephardic Jews has grown into a remarkably handsome city"(Kessel

[35] By calling Spanish colonizers the "discoverers" of Medellín, Kessel is erasing the Indigenous presence in the region. Language matters, it creates symbolic boundaries.

1947:110). This description not only offers a negative connotation of the Basques and Sephardic Jews but it also erases the Indigenous, Afro-Colombians and Mestizos of the region. His understanding of this racial make-up was no coincidence. During the formation of the Antioqueño identity there was a debate in which some anti-Semitic elites of the time put down the region for the Jewish or Jew-like characterization of the *Antioqueños*. This was derived from the persistent myth of the arrival of the *conversos*[36] during colonization. While this myth of the arrival of *conversos* has little evidence, the symbolic implications of said understanding are relevant even today.

According to Ann Farnsworth- Alvear in her monograph *Dulcinea in the Factory*, as a response to the negative anti-Semitic narrative, there were many theories that linked the prosperity of the region to an ethnic myth, *La Raza Antioqueña*[37]. Many who promoted a positive stereotype of Colombian regionalism described the Basque and Jewish presence as one that developed as a mestizaje in which whiteness was taken to predominate.

> The genetic and cultural contributions of Africans, in particular, were erased from most characterizations of Antioqueñidad. Unsurprisingly, paisa intellectuals relied on explicitly gendered imagery to construct this whitened narrative of regional identity. They described the region's women as fecund race mothers and their mountain-born sons as passionate adventurers, virile and 'strong of arm," as well as good businessmen. (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000:43).

White supremacy and masculinity are thus central to the formation of the regional myth. These undercurrents were reinforced and supported by transnational

[36] Forcibly converted Spanish Jews who settled in Antioquia in the colonial period. (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000:43)
[37] The Antioqueño race

repertoires like modernity and Catholicism. By the 1900s, Medellín found itself as a modern city and a capitalist leader in the region. However, given its profoundly Catholic traditions it had to adjust its ways of embrace modernity without fully undermining the religious identity that dictated much of the way in which *Antioqueños* behaved and engaged with one another. The process of identity construction shifted since independence as Latin America was in search for an identity of their own which yielded mixed results of modernity in the region (Larraín 2000:37). Modernity in Europe and the United States meant freedom, tolerance, science, progress, reason, as well as industrialism and economic development (Larraín 2000:12). Embracing Modernity in *Antioquia* was a tricky negotiation. On the one hand, the elite had ensured to uphold Catholicism as a way to demonstrate their worth as this was an important cultural category imported from Spain. On the other, it was important to keep up with the hegemonic narratives that came from the regions perceived as possessing the truth. As the only industrialized region of Colombia, *Antioquia* had to come to terms with modernity. The interconnected trajectories of modernity and identity can be seen through how paternalism was uplifted as a way to control many aspects of the new industrialized society which brought with it new "moral" challenges. "Identity is constructed not solely by discourse but also by the solidified practices of a people and therefore it can change but in a materially conditioned manner (Larraín 2000:37). This push and pull that *Antioqueños* had with modernity was evident to Kessel.


**HIGH MOUNTAINS** give Medellín cheap power, a pleasant climate, beautiful scenery and lively citizens.

# NEW CITY ON OLD

## Medellín's modern look is five years old

The physical face of Medellín wears two expressions: a brisk modernity and an ancient piety. Its business buildings reflect recent boom times and are being done in the handsome South American modern style. These and other projects for broad new avenues, parks and workers' settlements are all part of an integrated city plan started five years ago under a special city department. The whole appearance of the city has now been changed, but it still retains and cherishes its hundreds of small crosses and wayside shrines, which are a heritage of the past and a measure of the people's strong and abiding religious faith.

The other major cities in Colombia offer Medellín little industrial competition. The port towns are inclined to be sleepy, and the capital, Bogotá, prides itself on its political and intellectual atmosphere ("Even the bootblacks in Bogotá are poets"), just as Medellín boasts of its hardheaded business sense.

Colombians in general amuse themselves with jests about Medellín's feverish commerciality and thriftiness, but the Medellínenses keep right on going to bed early and working hard. They like to make money. In fact they like everybody to make money. Nowhere in South America is so little time wasted on a business deal. This sometimes results in jokes at Medellín's expense. There's the story, for instance, of a Medellín matron who got on a train with her maid and trousered son. When asked to pay full fare for the boy because he was wearing long pants, she argued if the fare was based on the matter of pants she should ride for half-price and her maid should ride free.

Far from being annoyed with this, the Medellínenses characteristically regard it as good publicity, like the old jokes in the U.S. about Ford cars.

*Figure 47 (Kessel 1947:110)*

"The physical face of Medellín wears two expressions: a brisk modernity and an ancient piety" (Kessel 1947:110). What Kessel observed was Catholic traditionalism which protected family life from the intrusions of modernity. Upper-middle-class women were expected to stay at home and young people were closely monitored at all levels of society (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000:40). Tradition and paternalism became the anchors to "safely" navigate modernity. Part of the Catholic propaganda of the time was to maintain gender norms and to encourage hard work.


*Figure 48 Religious Symbols Dominate Medellin, This Cross on Hillside Overlooks City Which Shows in the Background. (Kessel 1947:111)*

**PATERNALISM**

Kessel's characterization of the *Medellínenses* as having a "feverish commerciality and thriftiness" is of course aligned with those who are financially successful and enjoy a prosperous and respected life. Emilio Winters is perhaps the best example I can provide of such businessmen. He was the 28th participant in the semi-structured interviews. I was able to contact him through references by other participants. I was glad to have finally landed a stratum 6 interview, as these proved difficult to arrange. I arrived at a neighborhood called *El Poblado*, the most affluent neighborhood in Medellín. All around the subject's apartment complex there were

beautiful parks, nicely groomed streets, and high-rise buildings. I called Emilio to let him know I had arrived, and he notified the front door man that I was welcomed up. I took an elevator and was met by Emilio at the door. He invited me in, apologized that he was the one opening the door as his live-in maid was on vacation. He offered me water and we sat on a balcony overlooking the city. The apartment was nice; nothing extravagant but simple, clean, and airy.

Emilio was confident and throughout the interview it was evident that he felt that he possessed the answers that I may be looking for. His self-assurance made me a bit nervous as I felt like I needed to prove myself, and in some way keep up with him. What's interesting is that the questions to the semi-structured interviews that I had created did not yield right or wrong answers. They were about how individuals interpreted society from their perspective. Yet, based on our dynamic, I felt as though he was in control and I had to question my process. I observed this demeanor when interviewing people that lived in high strata: a sense of power, confidence, and sometimes arrogance.

Emilio, Strata 6

> *Ana María*: Please share your definition of high class.
>
> *Emilio:* [High class people] are those who help others around them. They are modest even though they live in luxury, they do so without opulence. Those who do the opposite are the nouveau riche like the mafia people, they are the ones who ride around in Mercedes Bens, the Medellín rich, well people who are high class of good class, those of lineage in other words, are people who are modest and collected.

For Emilio, the value of helping others is the first consideration that comes to mind when defining high-class. Paternalism creeped into the *Antioqueño* narrative as an illusion of support and goodwill when in reality, paternalistic behaviors were concessions that had to be made for those in power to achieve their means. Ann Farnsworth-Alvear demonstrates this in her monograph *Dulcinea in the Factory*. She provides the example of *Rosellón, Fabricato,* and *Coltejer* (textiles factories) in which employees demanded important rights like transportation to the factories and access to healthcare. At first, when these demands were made, they were denied by the industrialists as they had no incentive to concede. However, over time as there was a shortage of labor, factories found themselves having to compete to keep their labor force. To stay competitive, they had to concede to some of the demands made by their employees. However, they did not frame such concessions as compromises with the workers whose labor the companies needed in order to make a profit. "Rather as tokens of the mutual respect between a firm and its employees. Catholic gender discourse provided a site and justification for this illusion of mutual respect, not least because it allowed industrialists to represent concessions as gifts. Newly strict definitions of female chastity, elaborate systems for chaperoning working girls, factory beauty contests: these aspects of Antioquia's gender-based paternalism did not merely coincide with the provision of new benefits; they anchored the family symbolism that made workers' concrete gains a sign of loyalty and dependence" (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000:149).

*Ana María:* Please describe a poor person that you have met

> *Emilio*: I have met many [poor people], I own construction businesses and we remodel buildings and things of that nature. I manage low-income people; they are hardworking, so I help them by giving them jobs. I also know other poor people who are malucos[38] they are low class; those are the ones that you catch on the street stealing and that sort of thing.

Emilio portrays himself as a benevolent citizen by choosing to "help" others by offering them jobs. The fact that people (he is among many with these kinds of responses which will be showcased in this chapter) feel comfortable depicting their "compassionate" identity by doing something as transactional as offering jobs which is recognizably done for self-interests, demonstrates how deeply rooted these ideas of paternalism run. While this is central to the regional myth of the *Antioqueño* it is important to recognize that it also touches on many other contributing narratives like colonization and Catholicism. No wonder why these paternalistic attitudes are so rampant and accepted in society. They are reinforced as cultural categories that are defended by those who benefit from them and unfortunately internalized by many who suffer from them.

Notice how in Emilio's answer he also shares that he chooses to help those who are hard-working. There is an implied judgement that he feels comfortable owning and saying out loud. Somehow, based on his positionality, he feels the entitlement to decide who is and is not deserving. It would be one thing to discuss how he chooses who he wants to employ based on competencies related to the job at hand. However, what is

[38] Maluco: Ill, sick, bad taste.

concerning here is the framework from which he departs. How does he determine that someone is hardworking and deserving? Is it that they agree to his labor demands? Is it that they are capable of heavy physical labor despite their lack of insurance, fair pay, and all the other structural challenges that they may face? There are detrimental consequences when people make decisions that stem from this mentality.

This paternalism phenomenon in Medellín was studied by Ann Farnsworth-Alvear in her monograph. As mentioned above, she analyzed textile factories in Medellín and found compelling data as to how paternalism showed up in those spaces. As the factories grew, they developed ancillary departments to "help" their employees. They did this through a narrative of acting like a family where women needed to be protected by their *patrones*[39] and all employees needed to make the industrialists proud by behaving morally and working hard. Some of the activities planned by the factories included beauty pageants for female workers, a *patronato*[40], an in-house doctor, etc.

> At each of the city's textile mills, owners and managers responded to the possibility of workers' mobilization by turning to a paternalistic system that combined wage increases and generous benefits with patriarchal ideology. The companies began to present themselves both as families, with workers cast as children, and as the guarantors of their employee's families. Male workers' benefits enabled them to provide for their children, while female workers were safeguarded against sexual dangers and thus remained potential wives. Workers and owners alike described this paternalistic system of protection and control as *la moral*. Translatable as adherence to 'morals' or 'being proper.' By the 1940s, at the mills owned by the Echavarrías, la moral involved an explicit exchange: virginity was a precondition of young women's employment. (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000:148)

[39] bosses

[40] A junta of people who act as vigilantes within a social or cultural group so that they meet their goals, this also operates as an organization that is dedicated to help others.

The Echavarrías (mentioned by Ann Farnsworth-Alvear) were among the most affluent Colombians. Emilio talks about the Echavarrías in his interview:

> *Ana María:* Does it mean the same to live in strata 1 as to identify as low class?
>
> *Emilio:* Yes
>
> *Ana María:* How come?
>
> *Emilio:* Because generally speaking, people are not honest, they don't have a very important purpose in life. Therefore, they don't save money, and they don't move up in the social ladder.
>
> *Ana María:* Can you give me an example of a rich person that you have met?
>
> *Emilio*: Sure, do you want names?
>
> *Ana María:* I'm interested in understanding who they are, what they do? What is it that puts them in that category of a rich person?
>
> *Emilio:* Well, I have rich friends, but they are humble and calm. They are industrials, some others are from the financial sector. They are people who are worth 20, 30, 40, 50 million dollars easily.
>
> *Ana María:* Do you consider James Rodriguez[41] to be high class?
>
> *Emilio:* No, he probably lives in a high SES but that does not mean that he is high class. That is contrary to Juan Pablo Ángel, he is strata 6 and is a guy with class because his whole life he has lived with class. Before he started playing soccer he graduated from college, he has lived very differently.
>
> *Ana María:* When you were growing up, what was the stratum of your parents' home?
>
> *Emilio:* I lived in Laureles
>
> *Ana María:* So that means you lived in stratum 5?

[41] James Rodriguez is a professional Colombian soccer player who started his soccer career in *Envigado, Antioquia*. He was born into lower-middle class and is now a very affluent and recognized celebrity in Colombia. I asked about James Rodriguez in my interviews to get a window into how people made sense of status changes like this example.

*Emilio:* Yes, although at that time, it was not what it is today. I am over 50 years old. When I was young, people like the *Echavarría's*, all of them, they lived in the same…[area] as me. I lived in *El Parque de Laureles*, the one further north, the Governor of Antioquia lived catacorner to me. On the other corner, the *Echavarría* family. In the other corner, the *Ospinas*, the ones that own *Haceb*[42], we were a neighborhood where the industrials of the time lived.

*Emilio:* …Almost all industrialists of Medellín who lived in *Laureles* moved to *El Poblado*. *Laureles* used to be a very important neighborhood, now is it not as much. [He points out of the balcony and into the buildings nearby] These all used to be houses, like the house that you see here in the corner. Over there, there was a street full of huge houses, that building was a single house. These two building [referencing the building where we were in] was one house. The owner was the owner of [Textiles] Balalaika[43], it was an underwear brand….Those were big clothing factories that no longer exist.

*Ana María:* Of course, and at that time the textile industry in Medellin was in full force!

*Emilio:* Exactly, and the companies that survived were *Leonisa*[44], and then later on new brands came out. But here on this block, here across the street, Ochoa lived there. He was the president of the whole Antioqueño union. Even to this day, there are very important people that live here. That's why Pablo Escobar built a building right here, *The Monaco*. That building was taken down by the Cali cartel. Well they didn't fully take it down, it is still there. He [Pablo Escobar] would try to fit in, he would make a building, buy a farm, make a house, right next to the rich. But he was never welcomed in [into that society]. He was never allowed to join the country club, the rodeo.

*Ana María:* Was it a matter of class?

*Emilio:* Totally, he was rich, but he was garbage.

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[42] Haceb Industries started in the 1940s and was a small electrical repair shop. Currently it has over 2,800 employees and has branches internationally.

[43] Textiles Balalaika SA is located in Girardota, Antioquia, Colombia and is part of the Textile Manufacturing Industry. Textiles Balalaika SA has 141 total employees across all of its locations and generates $4.81 million in sales (USD). There are 3 companies in the Textiles Balalaika SA corporate family (Textiles Balalaika 2020c).

[44] Leonisa is a Colombian-based global company that manufactures and sells women's lingerie, shapewear, swimwear, men's underwear, and activewear for both men and women (Wikipedia 2020a).

The paternalistic behaviors that Farnsworth-Alvear observed in her study of the early 1900s are alive and well within the new generation of elites of the twenty-first century. Emilio belongs to the small and exclusive group of people who benefit from the *Antioqueño* narrative. They benefit because they are able to fulfill the narrative not only based on their hard work (this applies to some), but because they fit a criterion that others, no matter how hard they try, could not meet. Being a white male in the eyes of the Colombian imaginary of race, with social capital and a lifetime of reassuring narratives in which they have been told repeatedly that they are superior, intelligent, and capable, has palpable consequences on their possible outcomes.

Structurally as a society, *Antioqueños* who fit the narrative are set up to succeed and are continuously rewarded for who they are. While those who don't fit the narrative because of their skin color, gender, or social capital (among other identities) are confronted with an upward battle in which succeeding in capitalist terms is the exception, not the rule. This all happens while the advantages of those who fit the Antioqueño narrative goes unnoticed. There is a collective imaginary of meritocracy and a lack of awareness of the uneven advantages for those in power. Instead, those with privilege attribute their success to their hard work, their business acumen, their brilliance. While those with less privilege are left to wonder where they went wrong or why they are not good enough. This presents issues of stigmatization for those who don't fit the narrative.

Emilio's neighbors and peers were the same people that championed paternalism in Farnsworth-Alvear's book. They came up with paternalistic systems like

the beauty pageant as part of the factory cultural creation. The *Echavarrías* were among the people who impressed Kessel, the Life magazine reporter and photographer, with their narratives of success. Below are photos taken by Kessel of the *Echavarría* family as part of his article[45]. The Echavarría family and Emilio's family were neighbors while Emilio was growing up. Kessel points out that the business leaders in Medellin are cosmopolitans who usually are educated in the US. This is an example of access to opportunities that the average Colombian would not be able to achieve. When the *Echaverría* children come back from the US after being educated at Columbia, NYU, etc., they have access to jobs due to their credentials that others cannot dream of. This does not have to do with talent but to access to resources both financial and know how due to connections and generations of experience and support.

[45] It was incredible to me that in a city of 2.5 million people, when I finally landed an interview with a person from Strata 6 (Emilio), he was a neighbor to the Echeverria family. That the houses displayed with such opulence in those photos from Life magazine were neighboring houses to Emilio. As I embarked on this PhD journey, my very first Latin American studies course was with Dr. Steve Striffler who now sits on my dissertation committee. In that course, we read Ann Farnsworth Alvear's monograph which has been very instrumental to this dissertation. Her book focuses on paternalism and the role that the *Echaverria* had in reifying paternalism and using Catholicism as a vehicle to adhere to paternalistic practices in the midst of cultural changes brought about by industrialization and modernity.

# THE RICH

## They live in gracious style, are intricately interrelated

All the houses on this page are owned by members of the Echavarría family, which is split into rival business groups known as "thin Echavarrías" and "fat Echavarrías." Like members of the city's other ruling dynasties, their town houses are grouped together around Bolivar Square. But in the country the men of the various clans genially vie with each other in raising horses, cows, pigs, poultry, pigeons; the ladies compete over their orchids, which thrive well in this high, semi-tropical area.

The leaders in Medellín, like the textile tycoon Carlos Echavarría, are cosmopolitan, usually going to school in the U.S. He himself attended Columbia University in New York, where he played football. His elder daughter is enrolled in a convent at Tarrytown, N.Y. Even his dogs get around. The brindle boxer (*above*) is Madison Square Garden champion.

*Figure 49* (Kessel 1947:115)

CARLOS ECHAVARRIA, SHOWN WITH FAMILY, IS MEDELLIN'S NO. 1 INDUSTRIALIST

*Figure 50* (Kessel 1947:115) *Carlos Echavarria, Shown with Family, is Medellín's # 1 Industrialist* (Kessel 1947:115)


*Figure 51 (Kessel 1947:115)*

When Kessel was learning about Medellín, he clearly was hearing from the Elite and not interested in the subaltern perspective. He learned that "nearly everybody in Medellín makes good money and lives well." Thus the "everybody" that Kessel was referencing does not account for the Afro-Colombian and Indigenous populations or those who live in low SES (87.4% of the population in Medellín live in strata one through four). While the identities that were not accounted for make up the majority of the population, they often become invisible in many relevant discussions. This phenomenon happens to a degree that it hinders possible social outcomes. For example, the North American audience of Life magazine reported a misrepresentation of what really was happening in Medellín at the time. This misrepresentation coupled with paternalistic

ideologies are problematic as they reinforced inequity. Misrepresentation hides the realities and complexities of a given society which reinforces negative behaviors and decision-making that perpetuate these issues.

Paternalism in Colombia has carried such a strong force that it has prevented the peoples' consciousness to see many human rights as what they are: rights for all people and not privileges to be selectively handed out. Privileges that perhaps only those who belong and who fit a certain criterion "deserve" to have access to. Take public utilities for example: people who live in higher strata have access to better infrastructure which includes better access to public utilities like potable water, internet, electricity, etc. The narrative of the stratification is marked by a fixation on the "help" that people who live in low SES receive from the government and those living in high SES. However, what the general public does not realize, is that only 1% of the country's GDP is allocated to subsidize utilities through the SES. Moreover, those who live in strata 5 and 6 in Medellín make up only 12.6 percent of the population(Departamento Nacional de Planeación 2016). Thus, their contributions to the SES system are proportionally negligible.

It wasn't until 2010 that the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized water and sanitation as a human right through the resolution 64/292. This resolution called upon member states to "provide financial resources, help capacity-building and technology transfer to help countries, in particular, developing countries, to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all"

(United Nations 2010). With a strong lens of paternalism, many rights are reduced to "help" that only those who ascribe to the expectations of the people in power end up getting access to.

Paternalistic behaviors, like judging others and deciding what they deserve, is a phenomenon that I observed multiple times throughout the interviews. The cultural narrative of belonging plays a big role in the way people are judged by society. Those who belong are perceived as deserving citizens and those who don't, well, the same rights don't apply to them. A good example of this disjointed understanding of who is deserving and how much they deserve can be observed through the answer that Reynaldo provided when sharing his thoughts on the SES. Reynaldo Crabtree is a government employee who has years of experience distributing funding through several programs in the *Antioquia* region. His answers are concerning as they offer a window into the mind of someone with some power and decision-making abilities around public fund distribution in the region.

Interviewing Reynaldo was difficult as there were many micro aggressions camouflaged in his conversation with me. He made fun of some of my questions, talked down to me, and tried using technical language that proved difficult to transcribe. It was a challenge to transcribe not because it was eloquent and highly technical but because in what could have been his pursuit to project expertise, there was rambling and some incoherence.

**Reynaldo Crabtree, Strata 4**

*Ana María:* Can you describe a person of low-class?

*Reynaldo:* For me, a person who belongs to low class is a person that for example does not like to study, they like the fast life, perhaps they like to bring income by engaging in illicit actions, in other words they are low.

*Ana María:* Can you give me an example of a poor person that you have met?

*Reynaldo:* Yes, I work with many vulnerable communities in a variety of areas in Medellín, Antioquia. They are people who don't have access to potable water, sometimes they don't even have access to shoes, education is lousy, access to it is also lacking. I know a lot about this. I work in this. I would say that I work in many areas of Antioquia, which includes two municipalities where there is extreme poverty.

*Ana María:* Does it mean the same to live in strata one as to be poor?

*Reynaldo:* If we are going to be using the popular language that people use, yes, but if we talk about this from the framework of people who work in these communities, we know for example that strata one and two have way more benefits (specifically in the Medellín case) than in strata three. Let me explain, we our working group, we are more concerned with strata three than strata one because they already have quality schools, daycares, food subsidies. In other words, it is astounding, we are sponsoring them and we are further impoverishing them mentally. So in this moment strata one and two have more benefits than strata three.

*Ana María:* What are the advantages and disadvantages of the SES?

*Reynaldo:* Very good philosophical question that we are about to analyze here [laughs]. I do not research this topic, even more, there is a debate in which there is an argument for eradicating the SES system. There are topics of equity and equality. But I am not the person to give you relevant information there.

I'll go ahead and add a variable so that I can go ahead and answer your question. There is corruption, If I was able to improve the corruption, something that we have been able to do in some municipalities, if corruption improves, I do agree in the SES to support people who in reality want to persevere. [The SES should exist] only if there were adequate methodologies and education to disburse the help. What I was telling you [earlier on in the interview], do you need help? Are you pregnant? Are you vulnerable? Are you a single mother head of household? Are you displaced? I would help you. I would educate you, I would empower you

> and would let you walk alone and that would be it. That would be the extent of my help.
>
> However, the issue is that what is actually happening is backwards, we have funding, we support and what happens is that you end up not doing anything because the government is supporting you. I say this because I used to work with international funding from the foundation *Mi Sangre*[46]*.* I would talk to them about resources and they would say: No Reynaldo, I don't want those resources for empowering and entrepreneurship.
>
> This is because international NGOs were giving out from three to five million pesos per month to a land worker, you wouldn't believe it. I mean, that's millions of pesos, if you tell me I would earn five million in Medellín, that is enough to live tightly. But five million for them, trust me, they are basically millionaires.

Based on Reynaldo's answers, people deserving of "help" are those who are both vulnerable and hardworking. Since the myth is that they ended up in that position due to their poor decisions, the category of who deserves support becomes very small. The narrative becomes those who are in a bad life predicament but despite their situation will somehow fix their financial condition after receiving a small boost from the government. Instead of a service from the government to its people, this "help" is perceived as a transaction: deserving members receive some sort of "help" in exchange for the expectation that they will pull themselves up by their bootstraps and stop being a "burden" on society.

The expectations that are placed on those who don't belong are incredibly insulting given that they are not given proper social scaffolding, substantial infrastructure, and they encounter a lack of job availability. After receiving some "help"

[46] The *Fundación mi Sangre* is a non-profit organization founded by Colombian artist *Juanes*. Their vision is to "Activate ecosystems and build capabilities that enable new generations to lead the construction of a peace culture in Colombia." (Mi Sangre Foundation 2020b)

those of low SES are expected to magically attain resources and be able to navigate a society that was designed to leave them out. When recipients of aid are not able to achieve capitalist success, they disappoint people like Reynaldo who then have the power to change the concessions without centering those who they serve. In the paternalistic eyes of Reynaldo and many like him, people of low SES are a burden who ended up in their situation based on their poor choices. The lack of insight into how structural issues impede the wellbeing and access for so many people is appalling when considering that Reynaldo and others make lasting decisions without a proper framework that would equip them to be part of the solution and not the problem. The way the system is set up currently, it makes it so that recipients of aid have to make unreasonable and often unrealistic concessions which sets them up for failure.

When Reynaldo was sharing his thoughts about whether or not the SES should continue as a system, he explained that five million pesos[47] for a rural peasant was the equivalent of them being millionaires. Whereas for him, that would be a tight income. Sure, we are comparing the cost of living of a rural area with a metropolitan city. However, that is not all that he should be taking into consideration. Other expenses like access to comfort, to entertainment, to travel, cost the same for all thus uncovering some of the biases that are compounded in Reynaldo's answer. It is clear, that Reynaldo had already made up his mind about what he thinks people who live in low SES deserve.

[47] About US $1,400 (exchange rate 11/24/2020)

The SES serving as a paternalistic narrative was observed time and time again throughout the interviews. Renata Raphael does not agree with the SES and feels as though she is being taken advantage of by paying an inflated price for her utilities.

**Renata Raphael, Strata six**

*Ana María:* Are there advantages to the SES?

*Renata:* No, I don't see any advantages. Honestly, I don't think there are advantages because I think it is unfair that some people need to pay more for similar public utilities, it would be better if the SES could be subsidized in another way in which people don't have to subsidize the poor so that they have access to the basic public utilities.

Renata feels as though she is contributing more than the fair share for her utilities. What she does not take into consideration is that the quality of her potable water and her water pressure is far superior to other *Antioqueños* who live in strata 1 and 2. What Renata doesn't take into her calculation is that she counts on paved roads, access to major highways, manicured parks, etc. Renata does not have to worry about taking three separate buses to make it home from work. She does not have to worry about her home being located in a zone prone to natural disasters like collapses on the edge of a mountain. Her electricity does not come from an unofficial power source built by her neighbors which got seized by the private utility company that now charges her for a subpar service.

When Renata says "I think it is unfair that some people need to pay more for similar public utilities" she is assuming that the quality of the utilities is the same across the board (which is not the case and will be explore later in this chapter) and is not

taking into account how much proportionally she is receiving in the form of governmental spending (infrastructure, parks, safety, etc.) than those who live in low SES. This narrative was not only exemplified in people who lived in high strata but was perceived in all segments of society.

**Kaila Mcconville, Strata two**

Kaila had a similar understanding of the SES as Renata, yet she welcomes the "help." When I asked her what she thoughts of the SES she said:

> *Ana María:* What are the advantages and disadvantages of the SES?
>
> *Kaila:* The SES has lots of benefits, the lower the strata the more benefits that society has, more support, more help. I notice that the higher the SES the more expensive are schools, hospitals, all of it.
>
> *Ana Maria:* What are some of the disadvantages of the system?
>
> *Kaila:* The fact that people are discriminated against.
>
> *Ana María:* How does that show up, could you give me an example?
>
> *Kaila:* Well yes, the majority of people who are higher strata look at the people of low strata as if we were beneath them, or they make an effort to not be associated with those people [poor people], they are selfish.

Like Renata, Kaila does not take into consideration the many ways in which the affluent class benefits from government spending. However, she also brings up an important nuance about the pricing of education and healthcare in relation to the SES. As mention in Chapter Two, many insular organizations use the SES to determine pricing. For example, a student who attends public college can bring their utility bill to the financial office to show their stratum and pay tuition proportional to it. A similar phenomenon happens with the public healthcare system.

This undoubtedly becomes a roadblock for some members of the lower middle class who depend on those public provisions. And while that holds true, it is also true that those who end up getting into the public colleges for example, are traditionally more affluent students who went to private high schools, score higher on the entrance exams, and have the know how to navigate such systems. This phenomenon is NOT because those with access to less resources who go to public schools don't have the ability to score high on entrance exams. It is because they phase overwhelming structural issues which present roadblocks along the away that results in poor outcomes. Thus, when looking at the system as a whole people in high strata generally end up benefitting.

In addition to the perceived help that she is getting, Kaila also notices discrimination as a result of the SES. We will discuss discrimination in the second section of this chapter.

**Celesta Santora has no stratum as she is houseless**

Celesta Santora was one of the most interesting interviews that I had the privilege of conducting. I met Celesta in *Los Colores*, a strata 4 neighborhood. She agreed to participate and shared wonderful insight with me as we sat on a sidewalk. What was most remarkable about this interview is the level of nuance that she was able to provide when comparing the different strata. Celesta had a generally accurate understanding of some of the differences between each stratum (in terms of how the government determines each category). This was remarkable given that she lived under

a bridge and had never lived in a household that was stratified neither had she seen her bills being classified by strata.

Celesta did not carry herself eloquently and did not possess a wide breadth of formal vocabulary to express herself. It would have been easy to dismiss her answers as irrelevant given her lack of formal education and communication style. However, if one is able to set aside cultural expectations of who possesses the truth, it becomes evident that Celesta is deeply observant, insightful and resilient. She was displaced from Amalfi, Antioquia due to violence.

Her father and her daughters' father were both killed, and Celesta was driven out of her town in fear of her own life. She recently lost her nephew to drug overdose in her hometown. She lives in a makeshift structure made out of plastic bags under a bridge. She is able to get water from the local police station which she uses to shower. She works selling candy on the street, although some days she is not able to sell due to her health issues.

> *Ana María:* What's your address?
>
> *Celesta:* I don't have an address, because I live in *La Iguaná* as a displaced person in a makeshift plastic structure. They tore it down, but some nice people are letting me sleep next to theirs. At the police station they give me water for showers and cooking.
>
> *Ana María:* Please describe a person who is rich
>
> *Celesta:* I know a woman, Doña Marina, I am not sure if they are rich or not, you see it in the lifestyle, the houses and cars. One day I was coming from the hospital feeling fragile and I said hi to Doña Marina. I talked to her and wow, now I go to her and she helps me in a very impressive way. She does not say no to me, she gives me free food, money to buy candy [Celesta sells candy under a

bridge], she has helped me so much. I only met her recently but there have been other people who have been good to me.

*Ana María:* Please describe a person who is poor

*Celesta:* Me, I have suffered many acts of violence. They [unclear who][48] killed my dad, my daughter's father, my nephew killed himself using drugs recently, I have suffered.

*Ana María:* To you, is there any difference between a person who is rich or poor?

*Celesta:* In Gods eyes, we are all the same, for me, we are all the same.

*Ana María:* Do you think it is the same to be poor than to live in strata one?

*Celesta:* That difference is drawn by the government

*Ana María:* What do you mean?

*Celesta:* Hm what can I tell you? Ok, for example I am stratum 0, I do not have a stratum because I don't have any money. I have a couple of friends who live in strata 1 and they pay the same as some who live in strata 2, same price for utilities, gas, so it is very similar.

*Ana María:* What about the difference between strata two and three?

*Celesta:* It is higher at that point, they have a bit more power, I guess.

*Ana María:* And how does one see that?

*Celesta:* It's probably in the way the government handles things. Because in this country we have it tough. Those who are displaced[49]…it's been two years since I received any help, they lowered them [payments], they froze them, I have not had a home for the past 11 years. I have been struggling to claim my payments but have not succeeded. That is the governments' fault.

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[48] While Celesta does not specify the perpetrators that drove her to migrate to Medellín, it is likely to be the FARC. A report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) lists 411 people (143 families) as being displaced from Amalfi in 2007. The government was able to provide refugee camps for 45 families. In terms of subsidies, the Comité Municipal de Atención Integral a la Población Desplazada (CMAIPD) (The Municipal Committee for the Comprehensive Set of Fundamental Rights for Displaced Populations) agreed to hand out the following items to support refugee families to return back to Amalfi: 2 cleaning kits, a kitchen kit, one blanket and one sheet per family. (OCHA 2011)

[49] War displacement in Colombia info

*Ana María:* When you were little, what stratum were your parents?

*Celesta:* Deep poverty, I am not sure what stratum we were, but the truth is that we lived in terrible poverty.

*Ana María:* Would you say that your lifestyle has change since you were little, or would you say it has stayed more or less the same?

*Celesta:* It has changed. I had to move here [Medellín] due to the death of my family. However, I have sisters who are very nice, they have good jobs, my daughter is also there and has a job. So, my lifestyle has changed because they help me a lot. The problem is that they have a lot of commitments so they can only help me with what they can. If I want to, I can go and stay with them, I have good nutrition there, good clothing.

*Ana María:* So, your decision not to go back has to do with safety?

*Celesta:* Yes, safety and also, I don't feel comfortable there anymore. There are so many sorrows. However, the main reason is the danger. I had to sue all of the perpetrators so that's the main concern.

Celesta's description of someone rich is someone who helps her. Just like Emilio described, a resident of Strata six, the first quality that comes to mind when labeling a rich person is their ability to help. Given that Celesta cannot count on the government even after being a war victim, she is forced to count on the "help" from others. According to the Colombian Constitution, in article 51, it states:

> "All Colombian citizens have the right to dignified housing. The state will allocate the necessary conditions to ensure this right and will promote social housing plans as well as long term adequate financing structures."[50]

[50] "Todos los colombianos tienen derecho a Vivienda diga. El Estado fijará las condiciones necesarias para hacer efectivo este derecho y promoverá planes de vivienda de interés social, sistemas adecuados de financiación a largo plazo y formas asociativas de ejecución de estos programas de vivienda." (Translated by author).

The right to dignified housing was adopted in 1966 as part of the International Pact for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations Member States. It was put into effect in 1976. Thus, Celesta has been denied access to basic human rights and failed by the government for the past 11 years. This right appears in article 51 of the Colombian Constitutional Court and it includes the following:

> Adequate housing is a fundamental right of those displaced by violence. It can be enforced via a protective action, and the authorities have the obligation to: a) relocate the displaced people who, due to the displacement, have been forced to settle in high-risk areas; b) offer those people temporary living solutions, and later, facilitate access to permanent solutions; c) provide advice to displaced people regarding the procedures they should follow to access the programs; d) with respect to designing these living programs, take into consideration the special needs of the displaced population and the subgroups within that population, including elderly people, single mothers, children, disabled people, etc.; and e) eliminate the barriers that impede displaced people's access to the State's social assistance programs (Corte Constitucional 1966).

When Celesta shared with me that the local Police Station gave her water to bathe, I reflected on the nuanced relationship of the police with the public. Rank and file police officers experience complex dynamics within their roles based on how their multiple identities intersect. While in many ways they are given some power, which many officers abuse, in other ways, they are also victims of a system that sets them up for failure. Police officers are part of a system that does not offer them proper trainings that should be designed to center and uplift the local community. Instead, they receive trainings and frameworks that come from a place that seeks to punish and shame. As such, interactions with police are often contentious and oppressive while other times these interactions may exhibit paternalism and even some support. Celesta's example of getting "help" from the police station to get access to water uncovers some of those

complexities. While it may be a good deed that the specific police officers in the neighborhood grant her access to water, it is also true that Celesta deserves to have access to potable water because this is a basic human right and because as a victim of displacement in Colombia, she is owed that right from the government to secure a dignified life.

Upon reviewing Colombian legislation and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is clear that the system has deeply failed Celesta and that providing her with potable water at the police station has placed the onus on the rank and file police officers rather than providing a structure in which access to potable water happens in an equitable orchestrated way. The lack of inaction on behalf of the Colombian government puts Celesta at a disadvantage and transfers the responsibility from the government to the local rank and file police officers and other local community members who find themselves trying to solve a problem that is greater than what they are equipped or designed to handle.

When Celesta first told me that she got water from the police station, I thought this was a very nice act on behalf of the police. My initial assessment of the situation points to my own biases and learned framework from which I departed my understanding of the rights of displaced people in a country that is going through a civil war that has lasted almost 60 years. Instead of recognizing Celesta as a victim who has been failed time and time again by the system (being able to recognize structural issues and what happens at the macro level), I saw Celesta as an individual who for whatever reason, was not able to secure a dignified life. My own biases as a Colombian American

who grew up in a capitalist meritocratic society were shaping the way I understood Celesta and her story. These foundational understandings of how we perceive people define how we respond to their them. It is different if we respond to someone's needs vs. someone's human rights.

Celesta has to depend on help from family and strangers alike as the government has failed her. Paternalism and sometimes the concept of simply helping others, of goodwill, are very present in the Colombian imaginary. Paternalism is exacerbated by the strong presence of Catholicism. Just like it was observed through the example of textile factories and the Echaveria family, those with resources use what they have as leverage to negotiate with those who are in need. This is convenient for the government as some of the responsibilities are transferred from the government to its people.

For those who have, sometimes by providing a bit of "help" they are able to feel better about themselves. Take the example of Doña Marina, the neighbor who gives Celesta candy and supplies. Doña Marina may hire a domestic employee and only have to pay them the minimum wage which in Colombia is about $250 per month[51]. This rate is neither equitable nor fair. However, Doña Marina can tell herself that this rate is fair given that it has been set by the government. Thus, Doña Marina has a surplus of income in part because of the price of manual labor that she has access to. Doña Marina can then give Celesta small sums of money, used clothes that she no longer wants and the like. This boosts Doña Marina's self-esteem, power dynamics, and overall status as

[51] $250 dollars per month with an exchange rate from Dec 27th, 2020.

she is praised as benevolent and a given member of her community. However, deep inside, Doña Marina, knowingly or not, may recognize how unfair this system is and uses these tokens of help as a way to silence her guilt. As if those gestures make up for the gap of compensation and resources. This may not be necessarily what is happening with Doña Marina specifically; I simply illustrate this to depict the many layers that are compounded in this hierarchical society. There is a multiplicity of considerations when analyzing paternalism that go beyond any given interaction at the surface level. Colombians are faced with making decisions within the power dynamics and hierarchy of paternalism in a way that whether or not they are the oppressor or the oppressed, the onus and expectations that should fall on their government, falls on them.

Paternalism shows up differently depending on the relationships and the given identity of an individual. For example, Celesta's sisters and daughters who help her, play a different role in society and in Celesta's life than Doña Maria. They are helping Celesta perhaps not because of a paternalist dynamic, but because they are family. However, in family dynamics, these paternalism can still exist.

Celesta also helps us understand the impact that the SES has on the unhoused. When the government was categorizing housing from one to six it did not take into account the subsidies needed for those who lack stable access to housing. Perhaps the plan for housing the unhoused would come from a different funding source. Analyzing the SES strictly as a housing distributive system, it makes sense not to include those who don't have access to housing so long as there is a comprehensive plan for them. However, given that these six categories have been taken by society and adopted as a

symbolic boundary, increasingly the question of what implications the SES has on the identity of those who have no household becomes important.

As discussed earlier, Colombians have adopted the SES colloquially to describe other things. They use the SES as a spectrum. Sometimes the spectrum ranks from least to most desirable. The colloquial use of the SES varies depending on who is applying it and what class they belong to. In addition to using the one to six spectra borrowed from the SES, Colombians add categories to accentuate their point, oftentimes using categories such as zero or seven and eight.

Celesta, even though she has no reason to understand the SES as she has not lived in a home for the past 11 years, has a nuanced understanding of her status. She said, “I am stratum zero, I do not have a stratum.” While it makes sense to describe herself as a stratum zero, she acknowledges that zero is not an official stratum. Not being acknowledged by the government via a stratum becomes a very straight forward message to people in Celesta’s situation; a message that says: you don’t belong, we don’t even have a category to place you in, not even one of the “bad” categories. Celesta teaches us a lot about the importance of belonging, of representation, of departing from a framework that depicts members of society as deserving individuals of basic human rights and not as burdens.

## SECTION TWO

## TRANSNATIONAL REPERTOIRES AND HOW THEY REINFORCE SYSTEMIC ISSUES AND DISCRIMINATION

### Meritocracy, Discrimination and Biases

An important attribute of the *Antioqueño* narrative is meritocracy. The idea that whatever position a person has at birth through talent and hard work they can rise to the top. The *Antioqueño* is known for their work ethic, their reliability, and their consistency. This narrative is not only part of the success story that was created with the birth of the *Antioqueño* identity. This narrative has been central to the three transnational repertoires discussed in this dissertation: Industrialization, Capitalism, and Neoliberalism. All of these repertoires offer the promise of a country in which all people have the opportunity to climb the social ladder. The language of meritocracy paints governments as providing the adequate opportunities for talent and effort to rise to the top.

Meritocratic rhetoric is not confined to Colombia. The belief that those who succeed achieve this through their own merit without taking into consideration any structural advantages is common. Expectedly, the same perception is applied to those who don't succeed in capitalist terms. They are judged and punished for not achieving even though oftentimes there are no substantial opportunities. The concept of meritocracy was often present in the interviews. It is intuitive that a system designed to rank housing based on attributes from most to least desirable, aligns with the values of the three repertoires mentioned and thus it follows the narrative of meritocracy.

The SES reinforces meritocracy as it supports the narrative that those who work hard are the ones who end up living in households of high strata. Moreover, the SES informs the notion that those who live in high strata are the ones who are contributing to society through the fruits of their labor. As such, those who live in low strata

encounter several barriers based on the narrative that is created about them. They not only lack access to equitable opportunities to achieve great economic successes, but they are also seen as a burden to society. The interviews explored in this chapter discuss meritocracy in relation to the SES. It also investigates the way discrimination and biases are enacted by both the oppresors and the oppressed.

The interview with Chere below offers an important example of how the system often confuses those within it as there is a dissonance between what they need and the narrative that they have been given. Chere does not readily recognize the unfair set up from which the SES departs. This causes her to be conflicted about wanting certain supports and at the same time, rejecting ideas of help for people with less economic resources than her. She bases these attitudes on meritocratic arguments.

**Chere Pedrosa, Strata 3**

> *Ana María:* What are the advantages and disadvantages of the SES?
>
> *Chere:* The advantages are that people truly need it; they have a lot of benefits. I do not agree that a lot of times they criticize the Colombian government because here [in Colombia], they want everything for free and I don't think it should be like that. It is good to have the right to certain things but not everything for free. In reality, if people know how to take advantage, there are a lot of benefits for people of low SES. People of high SES pay a lot of money in taxes, that's good because from there is where they [the government] take out money for people of low SES. At the same time, I don't agree. The more you earn the more you spend so if a person is hard working and wants to save their capital for the future so that they can retire, they deserve their earnings as they are doing a good job. However, they have to pay up a lot of money just because they earn money so that is not fair. So I see there are advantages and disadvantages with the SES.

Chere's answers offer an interesting window into the consciousness of many Colombians who fall in the category of "the subsidized." A resident living in stratum

three, Chere feels conflicted about the SES. First, she highlights that those who need help are able to have opportunities due to this system. The narrative of the SES has worked on her, giving her the illusion that the system is designed in a way to benefit people like her. She, like many other residents, does not take into account the many systemic issues at play that make it so that proportionally the resources secured by the Colombian government are not invested in her neighborhood, the schools and parks her children have access to, etc.

Chere also points out that “they”, referring to the impoverished, want everything for free. In this context she disassociates herself from the poor. She goes on to discuss the merit of those living in high SES that through taxes contribute back to society so that systems like the SES could operate. She likes having access to said system, yet she feels as though those who have worked hard for their money shouldn’t be taxed to pay for the impoverished.

An important nuance to consider when reading her analysis is the space she occupies in society as a strata three resident. While she receives subsidies, these are proportionally smaller than her neighbors in strata one and two. Chere may define herself as belonging to the middle class and may stride for upward mobility. If Chere would move to a strata four neighborhood and manage to earn a slightly higher income, it is likely that her income would be cancelled out by living in strata four and paying higher prices on her utility bills as well as other expenses. One example of how this plays a role is through the cost of college tuition of Chere’s children.

Maile, a resident of strata four, connects key notions of paternalism with meritocracy. She sees the government as a central actor in providing help to those who need it.

**Maile Shuey, Strata Four**

*Ana Maria:* How difficult do you think it is to change stratum?

*Maile:* Sometimes people get used to the sponsorships and then they expect more. And no, in reality they need to work, they need to achieve for themselves. So, I think it would be better if the programs demanded more from people, like the EPM[52] fund where they give out scholarships but in exchange, they have to do civic engagement. So, you help someone out but in return they need to give back to the community. This could be done by strata, by program, by *comuna*[53], but it is better to do something around redistribution of education and to not abuse the system.

Her understanding of the SES is that of a system in which people need to earn the support that is being offered. The dissonance here is that Maile is coming from the understanding that people departed from a situation in which everyone has a fair and equal chance of succeeding. As such, she sees those who could use some "help" ending up in those situations due to their own negligence and inaction. Maile has a responsibility to name, unpack, and consider the implications of the systemic issues of oppression at play. She can only do this with the appropriate toolkit. The tools to unlearn this oppressive framework will be increasingly available the more we expand representation, uplift the voices of those who are oppressed, and foster spaces where critical thinking is prioritized.

[52] EPM stands for Empresas Publicas de Medellín. This is the company that offers residential public utilities.
[53] Comuna= neighborhood

If Maile had done the necessary self-work to understand the systemic issues at play, she may consider holding the government accountable rather than the victims of this system. The government is responsible for ensuring that opportunities for citizens are equitable and that resources are invested in all of its people. Opportunities for employment, fair wages, and access should be offered in a panoptic way regardless of skin color, social class, gender, social orientation and religion among other identities.

Moreover, while the state has a responsibility to offer Maile the necessary tools for her to understand systemic issues, Maile also has a responsibility. If the state does not offer her the necessary tools, she needs to seek it out, educate herself and act on it. There is a need for individuals in society to become change agents. Knowledge producers and policymakers, among other actors that have the capacity to influence cultural narrative,s are needed to help improve society and advance equity.

The narrative of the SES coupled with meritocracy has exacerbated the image of the impoverished as freeloaders. Without the proper tools to understand how systemic issues of oppression play a role is disproportionally disadvantaging those with subaltern identities, it is easy to assume that those who have access to the limited concessions offered by the SES are at an advantage, when in reality, the very opposite is happening. This framework is evident in Maile's response when she states: "In reality they need to work, they need to achieve for themselves."

In contrast with Maile, in the interview below, Marcus is able to share specific examples of structural disadvantages for those living in low SES. His insight may be due to the fact that while he operates a convenient store in a strata 4 neighborhood, he

grew up in a lower stratum. Additionally, Marcus's answers uncover some of the ways in which the narrative of meritocracy impacts the definition of the impoverished in Colombia. This narrative changes depending on who is defining it.

**Marcus Grimmer, Strata 4**

Marcus owned a convenient store in my parents' neighborhood. He already knew my parents as they often stopped by to purchase vegetables and other last-minute provisions. We asked him if I could interview him, and he gave me a time for me to stop by. I arrived at his requested time. The front of the store was stocked with fruits and vegetables; he sold limes, avocados, green onions, potatoes, corn, mirliton, plantains, granadillas, mangos, among other local crops. He also had a refrigerator with cold beer, glass bottles of sodas, arepas, cheese, eggs, ham, and *salchichón*[54]. He carried an assortment of chips, cookies, pastries, chocolates, candies, and gum. Behind the counter she carried *Aguardiente Antioqueño*[55], *Ron de Caldas*, lighters, and cigarettes.

This was a comprehensive convenient store that had all the necessities for neighbors with different needs and priorities. The cleaning and cooking staff would pick up the missing supplies to complete their tasks, the young people would purchase beers and cigarettes and post up outside of the shop sometimes playing cards, or dominoes, or just listening to the local radio and catching up. People would stop in their cars, on their way out for a pack of gum or a bottle of water. This convenient store was a central

[54] Summer sausage

[55] An anise-flavoured liqueur derived from sugar cane. Aguardiente is the most common type of alcohol in Colombia.

place where old and young, Black and white, rich and poor all crossed paths in this space for one reason or another.

As I arrived for the interview, Marcus instructed me to sit in the back room. I sat and set down my recorder, waiver, and notes for the interview. The room was filled with provisions that would eventually make their way to the front of the store. We began the interview and were often interrupted by patrons who would come in asking to purchase a ripe avocado, to add another beer to their month-long tab, or to purchase a lottery ticket as a gift for their grandfather. Marcus would get up, take care of his costumers and come back and swiftly pick up right where he left off.

> *Ana María:* Can you give me an example of a poor person that you know.
>
> *Marcus:* Let's say for example some of my friends are poor in the sense that they come from humble families. Otherwise, they are honest people and all of those things. They are people with whom I oftentimes relate, and they are poor and humble. I'm sorry, they are of low-class and humble. Poor is the one who does not want to succeed, that's what it means to be poor. The person for whom everything is difficult.
>
> *Ana María:* What social class do you consider James Rodriguez[56] to be?
>
> *Marcus:* He used to be middle class tending towards low class because he lived in a stratum two tending to stratum three. James Rodriguez was lucky. He is now high stratum, but he is not high class. He is a person that mentally does not have a high educational level, but he has money.
>
> *Marcus:* Advantages? Perhaps …that one has less needs the higher the SES. Hm how would you say that…like the needs or necessities, would be less. Do you understand me? Like for example, if there is a river and you live in high SES, the government would set up a canal system to re-rout the river. Do you understand? It becomes less dangerous.

[56] James Rodriguez is a professional Colombian soccer player who started his soccer career in *Envigado, Antioquia*. He was born into lower-middle class and is now a very affluent and recognized celebrity in Colombia. I asked about James Rodriguez in my interviews to get a window into how people made sense of status changes like this example.

*Ana María:* So the SES helps with that kind of infrastructure?

*Marcus:* The SES helps with that. They do all kinds of improvements and your stratum goes up.

*Ana María:* Do you think that having a number associated with your utilities bill has any benefits for you?

*Marcus:* They improve your utilities and charge you more taxes, they stratify you.

Marcus offers important insight into the way people define poverty and low class depending on how they identify themselves. This was a trend that I noticed throughout the interviews. In general, participants who lived in high strata used terms like poor and low class interchangeably. There was often an undertone of disapproval and prejudice. On the other hand, participants who lived in low strata had very specific definitions of poorness in comparison to low class. These definitions not always aligned, yet it is an important distinction to point out.

When I asked Marcus if he could give an example of a poor person, he said: *"*Let's say for example some of my friends are poor in the sense that they come from humble families. Otherwise, they are honest people and all of those things. They are people with whom I oftentimes relate, and they are poor and humble. I'm sorry, they are of low-class and humble. Poor is the one who does not want to succeed, that's what it means to be poor. The person for whom everything is difficult."

Marcus' answer is illuminating. When describing his friends who were poor, he felt as though he needed to be explicit about the fact that they were honest people. He then corrected himself and explained that they were low-class and humble, not poor.

He later shared his definition of poorness. For Marcus a poor person is a person who does not want to succeed, a person without drive. Marcus' definition of poorness demonstrates once again how deep-rooted meritocracy is to the fabric of the Colombian imaginary. Yet Marcus fights back against that imaginary by nuancing the definition of poorness and low-class. He wants to be able to find a way to differentiate between the people he loves and respects who by the general definition would be catalogued as poor. By nuancing the definitions of low class and poorness he is fighting back against a narrative that does not align with him or those that he loves.

Although Marcus owns a store located in a stratum four neighborhood, he identifies culturally with a lower stratum.

> *Marcus:* I have a lot of personality and I value myself. If I don't have something, that is no problem. If I don't have a car because I don't have money, I'm ok with that. I am always thankful. That I have health and that I live happy. Now when it comes to finances and other needs, I have enough to get by and I have opportunities.

Perhaps his financial situation is why he is able to see past the meritocratic narrative of the SES and is able to offer an analysis that many were not able to provide. When I asked him about the advantages of the SES, he said: "that one has less needs the higher the SES." In other words, that the higher the stratum, the fewer were the needs. While that definition is in line with what most participants reported, the framework from which he makes that assessment is rooted in the understanding that the government fails its poor residents and not the other way around. He says: "Like for example, if there is a river and you live in high SES, the government would set up a canal system to re-rout the river. Do you understand? It becomes less dangerous."

Marcus, a participant that has had a window into what it means to live in both low and high stratum, notices important ways in which people are affected by their environment depending on the infrastructure that the government is able to provide. It is curious that Marcus brings up this example of the city building a canal to re-route a river. As it was noted in the history of *Antioquia*, when Medellín was beginning to become industrialized and experienced a population growth, there was a large river that became an impediment for a segment of the population who lived on the other side of the river. The city built a canal system to re-route the river. This was done with the interest of industrial companies that needed access to that part of town. This was happening at the height of neoliberalism and industrialization thus when the public utility companies became privatized. Marcus's observation demonstrates that the trends that were seen when the SES was founded continue to hold true today.

Marcus's interview has taught me a lot. When I first met him and conducted the interview, I remember complaining to my family about how long it was taking me to transcribe as he sometimes rambled, and he didn't seem to have the most illuminating answers. As I wrote this dissertation for the past four year, I have read and re-read all interviews. When coming across this one, as I fleshed out my arguments, became more aware of the specific systemic issues of oppression that were reinforced by the SES, and recalibrated my own understanding of social dynamics, I realized that Marcus had very important insights; insights that I was too biased to recognize at first.

Section Two discussed the impact that meritocracy has on society when combined with the symbolic boundaries created by the SES. Meritocracy is deeply

rooted in Antioquia not only because it is part of the Antioqueño narrative but also because it is central to three important transnational repertoires that are present in the region: industrialization, neoliberalism, and capitalism.

In the following interview, Kittie offers two considerations that have not been discussed in this dissertation yet. 1) The way those living in low strata tend to be highly surveyed by the government and 2) the lack of access to certain utilities of those living in low SES despite the narrative of subsidies and access.

**Kittie Fraley of stratum 1**

*Ana María:* How do you describe a rich person?

*Kittie:* I think they need to have strategy to do business. I think a lot of the times they [the government] measure the SES by visiting households, and who assures them that those people are the ones who live there?

*Ana María:* So they [the government] surveys the houses?

*Kittie:* They look to see what their living situation is. Do they have a computer, do they have a refrigerator? Do they have public utilities?

*Ana María:* Do you think they assess the family's income?

*Kittie:* No, never.

*Ana María:* What do you think of the SES as a system for the people?

*Kittie:* I think that it is not worth it. Because they are not doing things the way they should be done. They don't assess income, they don't count how many people live in each household or how many people work, they don't assess which are the needs of a given family.

Kittie, a resident of stratum one, attributes richness to business acumen. Something that we can connect directly to the narrative of the Antioqueño and

capitalism. The meritocratic narrative is dangerous and harmful as it tells those who are not financially successful that they are in that situation because THEY are missing something. From the perspective of Kittie, that something is business acumen.

Kittie then moves on to describe how she thinks the SES is determined. She assumes that the government enters people's residences: "They look to see what their living situation is. Do they have a computer, do they have a refrigerator? Do they have public utilities?" There are two important considerations that Kittie helps us reflect on. 1)While it is not true that the government enters residences to determine SES, this observation was common among residents who lived in low strata. After offering a few follow up questions, I learned that residents of low strata perceive a high level of surveillance on behalf of the government. This came out in the form of police surveillance and government workers conducting census interviews and other surveys. What is curious here is that this was not something brought up by those living in high strata.

In addition to pointing out that those living in the low stratum are highly surveyed, Kittie's conversation also reveals an important consideration that was frequently omitted during throughout the interviews. Kittie reminds me that oftentimes those living in strata one and two lack access to some utilities: "They look to see what their living situation is. Do they have a computer, do they have a refrigerator, do they have public utilities?" The consideration of whether or not a person has public utilities like potable water, electricity, internet, etc. is very relevant when considering the narrative of the SES. If the point of the system is to provide subsidies for utilities, yet

some of the households catalogued as one and two strata don't have access to potable water and electricity, then suddenly the subsidy framework is no longer relevant. What continues to be relevant is a narrative in which the rich are painted as being taxed to subsidize the impoverished.

## SECTION THREE

## CULTURAL MYTH OF BELONGING

Section Two offered an overview of how industrialization, neoliberalism, and capitalism all reinforced notions of meritocracy, discrimination, and biases. These cultural repertoires are also reinforced by the SES. As a result, Section Two explored evidence of how this manifested in the semi-structured interviews. Similarly, this section will offer evidence and a discussion of how the main class determinants which serve as symbolic boundaries are also reinforced by the SES. Those boundaries include 1) Education level 2) Occupation, 3) Geography and public policy environment, 4) Capital endowment of the families of origin.

**Education, family environment, and occupation**

The small middle class that exists in Colombia is described by some as the "*clase sandwich*[57]." In the interviews, members of the middle-class voiced the unfair disadvantages that they face in trying to keep up with the middle-class status. This middle class was described by Moreno et. al in Section C of Chapter Three. This is not to be confused with the upper-middle class who have access to policy decision making power as well as hold the majority of the economic assets in the country. The lower middle class face a different reality. According to historian Tatiana Andia, people are

[57] The sandwich class

considered middle class in Colombia if they have income of about $600.000.00 pesos per month[58]. It is worth reflecting on this: a family that brings in about $200 dollars per month is considered middle class in Colombia. Despite having a goal of upward mobility and to live in housing of a higher stratum, this project is "a story of deep investment" as it is difficult to achieve (Romero 2020). What is observed more often is the opposite trend. Colombians are more likely to move to households lower in the socioeconomic spectrum. The middle-class often depends on the salary of only one member of the household and, as a consequence, any changes to their job status results in changes to their standard of living and status (Romero 2020).

The lower-middle class makes up about 30% of the Colombian population. According to the Library of Congress, the *DANE* and *National Planning Department (DNP)* refer to Colombia's lower middle class as "stratum three" (Hudson and Library of Congress. Federal Research Division 2010:102). A large percentage of people who belong to this class are clerks and small shopkeepers. One of their main priorities is to send at least one of their children to college. This priority of attaining a college education is observed in the collective imaginary of the Colombian society. Despite having been granted the status of belonging to the middle class people who live in housing strata 3 often don't have access to well-developed neighborhoods or utilities infrastructure.

> The subsidies that the state once granted to stratum three have been gradually dismantled, and as a result millions of Colombians have had to live in hardship from day to day, forced to take out loans to make ends meet. According to

[58] This is about $200 dollars.

> DANE, the policy of creating social strata in Colombia is "a technical tool for categorizing the population... mainly for the purpose of charging for public services," which, in the case of stratum three, do not include government subsidies in the majority of cases…Strata four, five, and six house only 6.5 percent, 1.9 percent, and 1.5 percent of the population, respectively. **In other words, only about 10 percent of the population lives in dwellings that are well built and located in well-developed neighborhoods with access to good utility services.** (Hudson and Library of Congress. Federal Research Division 2010:102)

Below is another example of somebody who considers themselves middle class. The difference between these subjects and the others is that they live in a stratum 5 neighborhood:

> *Chadwick:* Well, I am middle class and I think the disadvantage of the SES is that we are in a sandwich and so we don't receive subsidies, because actually those in strata 5 and 6 we pay public utilities and we contribute to subsidize those of strata 1, 2 and 3. And while that is logical based on the social equilibrium, people from those strata get so many benefits, so many subsidies and the ones in strata 5, don't.

While Chere lives in stratum three and Chadwick in stratum five, they both share the same perceived grievance of not receiving any or little support compared to their neighbors in lower strata[59]. Even though they may see themselves as part of the middle class at risk of downward mobility due to their precarious status and limited access to the characteristics of what classifies someone as middle class in Colombia.

In Colombia, many of the members of the small middle class describe themselves as having to make significant sacrifices to enjoy the middle-class status. These sacrifices may mean that only one of the children in the household is able to earn a college

[59] Note that this is a perceived lack of support of the government given that neighborhoods that are labeled as having higher strata count with more comprehensive infrastructure which is a direct investment of the government.

degree, that the family shares one car for all of its members, and that the parents give up some of their personal goals so that their children can achieve greater access. All of these sacrifices are made in the name of generational social advancement.

Is this description of middle class aligned with the collective imaginary of what it means to be middle class? How did families living in stratum three and bringing in about $200 dollars per month become part of the narrative of the middle class? How has this definition further inhibited the ability for individuals to prosper and keep up with the notions associated with middle class? The general definition of middle class and the middle class that I just described above are two distinct concepts. Is this a phenomenon that was exacerbated by the introduction of the SES? Ultimately, the number three fits neatly with the term "middle-class." The answers to these questions are not available in this dissertation. However, they are important questions to reflect on and consider in this context.

This definition of middle class is deceiving, which creates confusion and poses consequences. For example, policy makers may not be as aware of the precarious conditions of the *clase sandwich* and may be less likely to propose comprehensive policies to support them. Before one can begin to address the inequities in a system, one must understand the truth of the situation.

This deceptive definition of the *clase sandwich* and stratum three offers a narrative that puts its members at a disadvantage. A class in which people need to actively demonstrate they belong. They do this by overextending themselves, sacrificing, and perhaps not achieving happiness. The *clase sandwich* strives for upward mobility in

the hopes to truly fit in, with the illusion of having a more comfortable and less stressful lifestyle[60]. They experience cognitive dissonance as they are considered neither lower class nor upper class.

**Family Environment**

In the next interview Will, a strata two resident, points out issues of discrimination as a result of the narrative that is created around the SES.

**Will Meisinger from Strata two.**

*Ana María:* Please describe a poor person.

*Will:* Well, it depends on their stratum, because for example there are poor people who are unemployed and homeless, people who live in makeshift houses in *invasiones*[61], or in wooded houses.

*Will:* Well, I used to live in a small town, so when I arrived in Medellín is when I began to become aware. In small towns there are no social classes. I don't know, the neighborhoods are not labeled by strata. For example, the neighborhoods are either rich or poor, in small towns one is not aware of the SES. Here in Medellín, one becomes aware.

*Ana María:* Is there a difference between being poor and low class?

*Will:* Yes, because poor people are unemployed, they go out for the daily *rebusque*[62]. A person who is low class at least has a job.

*Ana María:* So, a person who identifies as low class has more money than a person who identifies as poor?

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[60] This was not only discussed in Edgar Romero, but this is also something I observe in my own family. I see my aunts and uncles sacrificing so much so that their children, or one of their children could have access to an education. I witness them living month to month. I see them taking out different loans to be able to afford school tuition or a trip for one of the children. I witness my family driving one car for the whole family, or a motorcycle, or in other cases, no car at all.

[61] Las Invasiones translate to "the invasions" and it refers to neighborhoods that emerge from an unmet need to affordable housing. In other words, established and developed with no outside or governmental regulation (Williamson n.d.).

[62] Rebusque refers to a daily struggle to find resources. It often encompasses informal activities like selling candy on a bus, singing on the street or looking for temporary jobs.

*Will*: It's not that they have more money, it's more about comfort. They [people identified as low class] would at least have a home, they would have money to pay for a home. Because poor people don't have homes. Or at least they don't pay rent by the month but rather by the day.

*Ana María:* Is identifying as stratum one the same as identifying as poor?

Will: I think there is a difference between the stratum and being poor. Because usually, based on what I see, with a stratum at least one has a way to find the means. Or at least through the *rebusque* or earning minimum wage plus the stratum [perhaps he is counting the stratum as another source of income?]. A poor person has none of that, that person just has to go beg for money or go outside for the *rebusque*.

*Ana María:* How old where you when you came to Medellín?

*Will:* I was 20 years old when I graduated from High School, that was in 1988. In 1989 I came here to Medellín.

*Ana María:* Did you first hear about the SES when you moved to Medellín?

*Will:* No, I came here and started working at a hotel. I started learning about the SES when I began working in this neighborhood [*Los Colores* neighborhood]. I have been here for 26 years.

*Ana María:* So, in your opinion what are the benefits or disadvantages of the SES?

*Will:* Well in reality, I am not sure. You don't notice them so much in high strata. However, in low strata maybe they assign them so that people have access to more resources from the government.

*Ana María:* Do you agree with the SES?

*Will:* No because there is a lot of discrimination coming from high strata against low strata.

Will was born in Urabá, Antioquia. A region in the northwestern edge of Antioquia bordering Panamá that is thought of as being lawless. Urabá has a history of violence that can most recently be traced to the 1960s when a road was built between

Turbo and Medellín, which triggered a wave of migration due to the banana trade that was happening in Urabá. "Three hundred banana plantations were created by the *Frutera de Sevilla*[63]" (pbicolombia 2018). Due to the unprecedented wave of migration, Urabá faced issues of access to infrastructure in public services and a lack of presence of the government to respond to said needs. In many parts of the region there was and still is a need for access to basic utilities like water, sewerage, and electricity (Inés García 2003). In addition to lack of access to utilities, the region also sees high levels of litigation around land grievances (García et al. 1996).

Much of the Urabá region forms part of a collective property that was established under law 70 in the 1993 constitution (pbicolombia 2018). This collective property decree was granted to people of African descent because their ancestors had been living in this area since the eighteenth century. As descendants of enslaved people "they opted to live according to their African heritage (*cimarronismo*) and they took refuge in the deep jungle. According to these laws the lands are nontransferable, imprescriptible and guaranteed against seizure, since collective property are organized as inhering to Afro-descendent peoples' ethnic and cultural identity" (BPI Colombia 2018:88). However, the truth of the situation looks a lot different on the ground. Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities are victims of inadequate infrastructure, unfair governmental deals with multinational corporations, and violence on behalf of the military, the FARC, and the ELN.

[63] a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company.

Why is this relevant to the SES and the study of *Antioquia*? Because this region is part of *Antioquia* yet structurally, economically, and in terms of access, the Urabá region does not count with nearly the same infrastructure as Medellín and the Aburrá Valley. It is no coincidence that Urabá, despite having fertile and flat terrain is at such a disadvantage compared to the more inhospitable terrain where Medellín is located. What is evident here is systemic racism and the way access gets distributed depending on peoples' intersectionalities.

Will came to Medellín at a time when Urabá was becoming an increasingly dangerous place. In Urabá "the annual rate of homicides tripled between the 1970s and 1990s, coinciding with the appearance and strengthening of organized armed movements (FARC, EPL, paramilitary groups, State Security Forces), who were fighting for socio-political control" (pbicolombia 2018). Forced displacement is not only a consequence of war; as maintained by numerous investigations, forced displacement is also a result of economic interests (Botero Herrera 1990). The majority of displaced population that migrated from Urabá due to war and economic interests, lived for many years in shelters or with relatives in other regions of Antioquia and Choco (PBI Colombia 2006). When families returned, they found that their land had been seized by paramilitaries and it had been turned into palm oil plantations (BPI Colombia 2018).

By the time Will migrated to Medellín, Urabá had been experiencing large migration patterns and still lacked infrastructure. What Will found in Medellín when he arrived was a highly stratified society, one in which he felt discriminated against. When I asked Will how he became aware of the SES he said: "Well, I used to live in a small town,

so when I arrived in Medellín is when I began to become aware. In small towns there are no social classes. I don't know, the neighborhoods are not labeled by strata. For example, the neighborhoods are either rich or poor, in small towns one is not aware of the SES. Here in Medellín, one becomes aware." His response is telling given the oppressive living conditions of Urabá. When he arrived in the big city, he witnessed opulence, access, and functioning infrastructure.

Will worked in *Los Colores*, a stratum four and five neighborhood (depending on the building) where the majority of residents are white passing and the workforce that serves them cleaning, guarding, and fixing their properties usually have darker skin. While Will was able to witness functioning infrastructure, he also saw right through a society that prioritizes those who have lighter skin. Will works in an apartment building cleaning the pool, the gym and other facilities in addition to other general maintenance tasks such as cutting the grass and gardening. After performing these service-related tasks, he rides his motorcycle to his neighborhood, which is strata two. There, most people move around in motorcycles or public transportation and building structures are generally three-stories high with different families living in each level. Oftentimes, the structures have exposed brick; not in the way that in the US we have exposed brick to signal the historic nature of a structure but rather because families generally build as they are able to afford. Sometimes, the work does not get finished or may take many years to finish.

As a reminder, *Los Colores*, the neighborhood where Will works, is the neighborhood where my parents live and where I conducted many of the interviews.

Below are a set of photos taken from google maps picked at random in the following three areas: El Reposono, in Urabá, Granizal (a stratum two neighborhood where Will lived at the time of the interview), and *Los Colores*.


*Figure 52 El Reposono, Urabá* (Google Maps 2013)


*Figure 53 Granizal, Stratum Two Neighborhood* (Google Maps 2013)

(Google Maps 2015)


*Figure 54 Los Colores, Stratum four and five neighborhood* (Google Maps 2013)

Notice how *Los Colores* has a bike path, space between houses with ample parking, and manicured roads. While there is some infrastructure in Will's neighborhood, it is evident that the state of the houses is not in optimal conditions. Finally, in Urabá the roads are not paved. Notice the power lines in all three pictures. The quality of the installation of electricity alone is symptomatic of the structural support that each neighborhood receives.

Will left a region of Antioquia where the lack of access to utilities was palpable, to join a more affluent area. However, Medellín had a message for him. You do not

belong; you are not deserving. Will did not go into detail to describe the ways in which he felt discriminated against. Since he did not readily offer more context, I decided not to press as to respect his privacy knowing that discussing discrimination is often triggering and I did not find it appropriate to ask him to re-live previous traumas.

In the interview, Will was able to offer details about the differences of what it means to identify as impoverished in contrast with low class and strata one. This is illuminating because, as mentioned earlier in the interview with Kittie, this level of nuance to differentiate between the terms mentioned above was only perceived in people living in low SES. When considering Will and the area where he migrated from, it makes sense that his definition of poverty is more nuanced given the level of poverty that he was likely exposed to when living in Urabá. Even if he himself as a resident of stratum two in Medellín, may have had access to certain utilities if he was still connected to Urabá in anyway, he would have a point of reference for extreme levels of governmental abandonment and poverty. Below are some illustrations summarizing the Urabá land conflict from 1993 to 2017. It is likely that Will is personally impacted by the narrative below:


*Figure 55 (BPI Colombia 2018)*

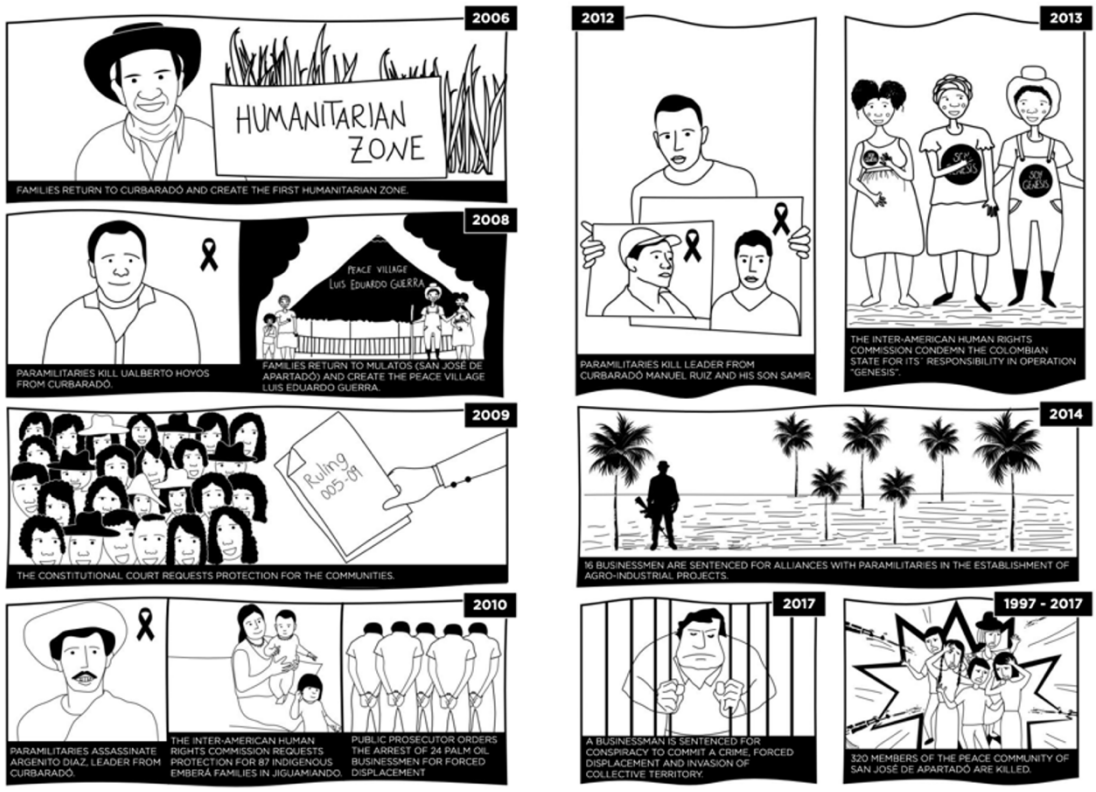


*Figure 56 (BPI Colombia 2018)*

After witnessing this level of poverty, abuse, and neglect, Will is able to discern that those living in stratum one with a job that pays minimum wage are not poor: they simply live in stratum one. His definition of poverty may be aligned with what he sees happening around him. It is all relative. It was important for Will to clarify that poor people and people who identify as low class are two different categories. Not because low class has to do with a pejorative cultural definition, but because in his spectrum, low class is placed above poorness.

Some of the answers provided by the respondents directly mentioned the SES to define the concepts of richness and poorness. When asked to provide an example of a poor person that she knew, Erin Sorensen living in tratum four, stated.

> Yes, I know a woman that has problems with her son, she works with my sister…she lives in a "*barrio popular*" stratum one and works a domestic job.

Sorensen chose to define the concept of poorness by placing the person she knew in a geographical context. This indicates the importance that *Antioqueño* society places on geographical location to determine someone's economic status. Soresen could have chosen from alternative indicators to describe a poor person, yet she chose "stratum one" and "barrio popular". "*Barrio popular*" refers to poor neighborhoods similar to the term "*barrio bajo."* The latter term is a concept borrowed from urbanism during the Industrialization Period in European cities. The term "*barrio bajo*" specifically originated in Madrid, Spain, in the mid XIX century and was used to determine social differentiation and urban structure (Romanos 1861, 191). Sorensen's statement places an historical term used to differentiate social classes next to the SES, which can be argued to be a contemporary social categorization tool used by Colombian society. Sorensen's answer demonstrates the power that the SES has had on influencing society in how they think about themselves and others. This official classification system has become so mainstream that people use it loosely in their daily jargon.

Larry Cullen, stratum three believes that living in "low stratum" is the same as being impoverished. He uses himself as an example of someone impoverished that he knows. After being asked "Can you please describe an impoverished person and can you please give me an example of a poor person that you know?" he states:

> Poor are the ones that only have what's necessary…There are many [poor people], they are like this [like me], of low stratum.

There are two salient considerations in his response. The first is that he considers himself to be impoverished, something that most respondents did identify with. Even when they lived in stratum one residences, they often described an impoverished person as someone who did not have housing. An interesting follow-up question would have been to inquire about his identity as an *Antioqueño*. Given that he considers himself to be poor, and the *Antioqueño* identity is closely linked to work ethic and entrepreneurial skills, it would have been telling to learn how Cullen copes with the juxtaposition of both identities.

Another interesting factor of Cullen's response is that he lives in a household categorized as stratum three, yet he still considers himself to be of low stratum and to be impoverished. Usually, respondents that lived in stratum three identified with being middle class. However, respondents that lived-in strata four or higher often did not consider people who lived in stratum three to be middle income but rather poor. Perhaps Cullen's response was tainted by what he thought my perception of his status was, or, perhaps, his response demonstrates that there is not an overarching definition of what it means to be stratum three. However, regardless of the motive that drove Cullen to state his response, he demonstrated that the SES has played an important role in shaping his identity and placing him in the category of impoverished.

# CONCLUSION

## RELEVANCE, IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Before the SES, things were different. [Social] classes were not as prominent. Back in the day people were more united. Now society is more separated, there is less communication. It is because of the SES.
-Marcus Grimmer, strata four

This dissertation answered the following research questions:

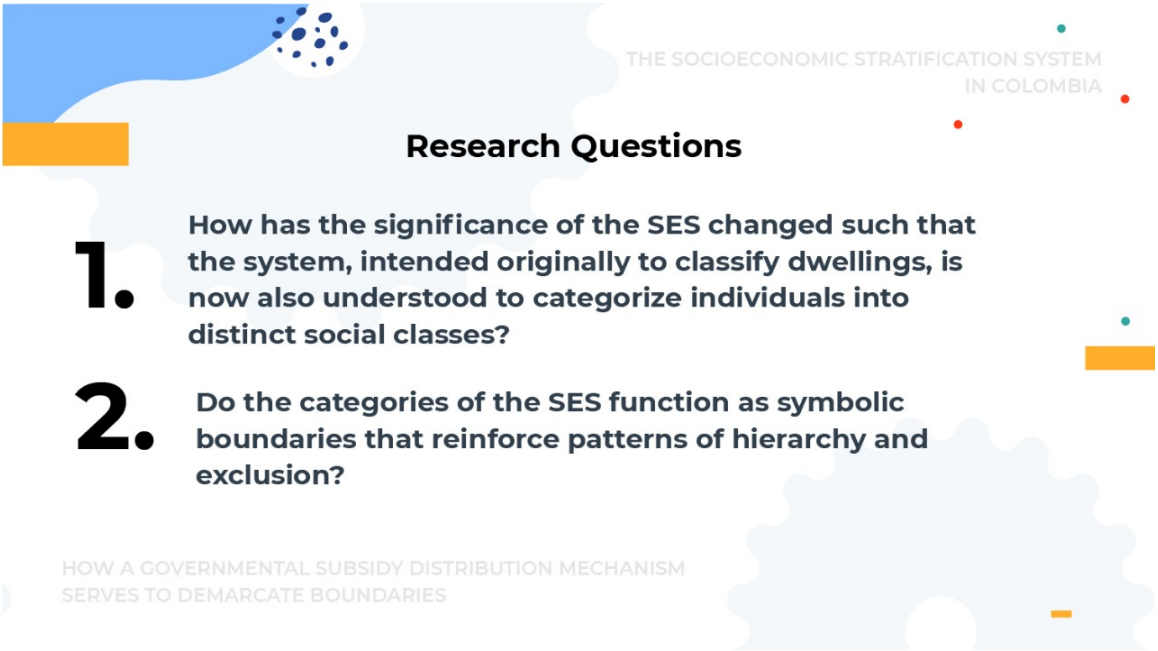


*Figure 57 (González Díez 2021)*

Chapter Two addressed the first question by looking into the way scholars applied the SES in their own methodology. The findings demonstrated how deep rooted the SES has become to the identity of Colombian people. Scholars who are expected to be partial and to base their research on precise methodology, often use the SES to

measure income of the individuals. This is problematic as scholars are knowledge producers. The way they engage with the SES has implications for the rest of the population.

Scholars are not the only group that use the SES to describe others. I provided examples in the introduction as to how the SES is used colloquially, in social media, and in everyday language by Colombian citizens. Out of the 31 semi-structured interviews that I conducted, 100 percent of them demonstrated the same pattern. Colombians often describe people in addition to housing using the SES ranking system.

Chapter Three laid out three central elements that define class in Colombia.

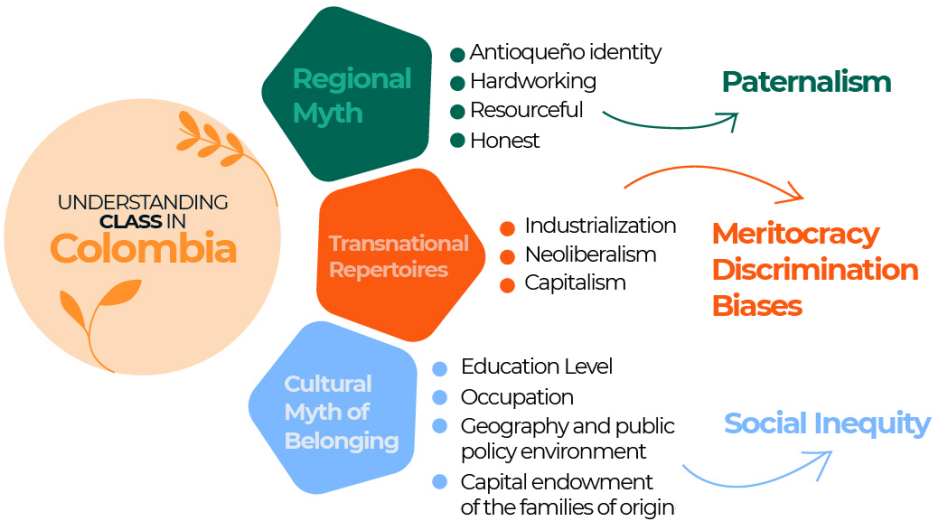


*Figure 58 (González Díez 2021)*

These elements include: 1) the Regional Myth of Belonging [*Antioquia*], 2) Transnational Repertoires, and 3) the Cultural Myth of belonging [Colombia]. Each one of these were explored in Chapter Three and used in Chapter Five as the foundation to further explore the interview answers.

Given the simplicity of classifying society from one through six and the natural fit of aligning this categorization system with pre-existing categories of social class in Colombia, the SES was swiftly adopted by society and became yet another symbolic boundary from which to discriminate and draw distinctions. In Section One, I explored how the *Antioqueño* regional myth of belonging centers paternalism at its core. I then analyzed the role that paternalism had on the SES. By exploring several interview answers, it became apparent that part of the definition of richness and high SES was linked to the narrative of "those who help." Participants talked about helping their employees by hiring them. They also talked about the help that they received from someone living in higher SES by receiving their gifts. Like Doña Maria who gave Celesta candy for her to start her candy selling business.

It was observed that "those who help" are oftentimes ascribing to a role in society that is not necessarily benevolent. For example, Emilio is not "helping" the people he employees by hiring them. He is simply engaging in an exchange of labor for money. This trend was perceived often. What was troubling is that the narrative points otherwise. People who live in households of high and low strata defined the rich and people of high SES as having helping qualities.

The "helping nature" narrative of those living in high SES was not the only misleading narrative observed. Many participants living in high SES feel as though they are being taken advantage of by the system. They perceive themselves as high contributors to the subsidies for utility infrastructure, they feel as though the government is not giving them the same kind of "handouts" that people who live in

lower SES have access to, and they notice that they have to pay full price for services like college and healthcare.

What many respondents failed to notice is the following: 1) the government substantially invests more on their manicured neighborhoods, 2) they have access to quality infrastructure and access to all of the utilities, 3) the elevated amount that they are paying for their utilities is so small that it barely makes a dent on the subsidies needed and 4) the government has to step in and pay the majority of that subsidy. The reason for this misalignment is the strong narrative that was created around the SES and that is reinforced by paternalism as well as the transnational repertoires centered in this work. This misrepresentation of the SES that is often accepted by those living in low SES presents problems of identity, feeling of indebtedness to people in high SES, and confusion.

Another detrimental impact of the SES and its alignment with paternalism is that oftentimes those in power feel entitled to judge and decide what those who receive "handouts" deserve. Examples of this were provided when Emilio was sharing his thoughts on who deserved to be hired by him. This was also exemplified in the way Reynaldo was describing the needs of a farmer versus a person living in Medellín. There are clear double standards that vary depending on whether a person belongs to the upper-class or not.

The symbolic boundaries that the SES offers reinforce tolerance for inequality and discrimination. The SES was introduced within a white supremacist framework. As a result, those who live in low SES and whose identities are subaltern to this narrative are

discriminated against and face overwhelming systemic issues that hinder the potential outcome for economic success and for having a sense of belonging in society.

In Section Two of Chapter Five, I analyzed the role that meritocracy has on the SES. This narrative has been central to the three transnational repertoires discussed in this dissertation: Industrialization, Capitalism, and Neoliberalism. All of these collective imaginaries offer the promise of a country in which all people have the same opportunity to climb the social ladder. This idealistic, racist, and inaccurate narrative is deep rooted in the Colombian imaginary as evidenced by the responses in the semi-structured interviews.

The system often confuses those within it as there is a dissonance between what they deserve and the narrative that they have been given. Take for example Chere. She rejected support from the government given to those living in lower strata. As a resident of strata three, she struggled to maintain her status. However, given her view of government support as an abuse to those in high SES, she is left in a difficult position. Since she believes in meritocracy so fervently, she is left wondering why even though she is working so hard, she cannot achieve as much as those living in higher SES. As a result, this meritocratic narrative has a detrimental impact of people's sense of self and confidence. It also emboldens those living in higher SES, even when they have not earned their position.

The narrative of the SES coupled with meritocracy has exacerbated the image of those in low SES as freeloaders. It assumes that people depart from the same level. Although it's a system that in theory is supposed to "help the poor," it is blind to

inequity in its structure. As a result, the SES reinforces otherness, discrimination, and systemic issues of oppression.

**Recommendations**

When I was a little girl in Colombia, I asked my parents about the SES. I learned it was a classification system and I later witnessed how the SES was used colloquially. When I was a graduate student, I went back to Colombia and asked my family to help with logistics for the semi-structured interviews. This was in service of answering the SES research questions. Although the SES is common knowledge to most Colombians, its implications remain hidden to most.

One of the exceptional contributions that I was able to offer this work is my unique positionality. I grew up in Colombia. I am a scholar trained in the United States. And I am a social justice advocate working in the frontlines towards equitable access to higher education and contributing to the creation of a model that is less racist and classist. I'm also working directly with Black and Brown youth and I learn from them every day. Growing up in Colombia, I experienced the symbolic boundaries of the SES firsthand. This of course is from the experience of being a resident of strata four. As belonging to the *clase sandwich*, while there were aspects of my life that were difficult, I comparatively benefitted from repertoires that served as symbolic boundaries to determine who belongs and who does not belong in the Colombian imaginary.

Even though the Colombian society readily identifies the SES, as evidenced by 100% of the interviews, the awareness of the implication of the system is a different

story. What I witnessed was that Colombian society had a high tolerance for inequality. This is deeply informed by the false narrative that is reinforced by the SES and by the three repertoires into which the SES was introduced and enacted.

The bottom line is that the SES serves as a tool to stigmatize society and to demarcate who belongs and who does not belong using a false narrative. These narratives paint a false picture of those who are made to be outsiders as lazy, incapable, and not applied. It also paints a false picture of those who are made to belong. They are painted as benevolent, high contributors to society who have gotten to where they are due to their own merit. These narratives are not only inaccurate, but also perpetuate inequality.

This dissonance is happening in front of our noses. Out of all of the interviews that I conducted, the ones that taught me the most and challenged my own understanding of the SES were from residents who live in low SES. I was intentional about centering the voices of the participants of the semi-structured interviews to shift them from subjects to agents. The communities that are most impacted by the negative consequences of this narrative are the same communities that historically have had to overcome the most and have gained important skills to succeed in a very uneven society. Their brilliance and resilience are what is hopeful about this research. Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities have taught us the importance of representation in the context of the census. We learned from their grassroots work that in order to achieve justice, race and ethnicity need to be accounted for in order to

measure social outcomes. That important insight should be applied to the SES. In order to strive for systemic change, the true implications of the SES need to be exposed.

If Colombian society was able to see the symbolic boundaries imposed by the repertoires described here then attitudes, actions and, ultimately policies would change. However, the problematic goes beyond these observations. So long as the privileged are centered and given the power to be the ones making decisions for society, the changes that are needed will not happen. It is imperative to have representation in all areas of leadership and decision making so that policies are revised/created with everyone in mind. Since Colombia operates in a white supremacist's framework, by centering Afro-Colombians and Indigenous communities, we can begin to focus on the urgent needs for change in our society.

Even though I was curious about the SES growing up and had all the best intentions about equity, at the time I did not have the necessary tools to understand the gravity and impact of these symbolic boundaries that exacerbated systemic issues. I came to the United States and, for the first time, I experienced racism. My mom worked cleaning houses and my dad worked loading cargo airplanes. Their professions, our immigrant status, and the fact that we did not speak English made it very clear that we did not belong. These experiences caused me to re-think my identity, to question why I knew that I had ancestors that had come from Spain but had no idea about my Indigenous background. Those experiences of feeling "othered" in the United States led me to question the SES and embark on a journey through my graduate program. Despite

my lived experiences, my nuanced understanding of the implications of white supremacy and discrimination reached another level when I moved to New Orleans and specially through my work at Bard.

Despite having experienced difficulties like racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and other structural barriers I also benefited from white supremacy given that I am white passing. Considering this, I will never truly know the plight of the people with other intersectionalities that are more oppressed than my own.

For these reasons it is imperative to center the voices and experiences of the oppressed. There is so much brilliance within communities that are often overlooked. This historical oppression also means that these communities have experience organizing, supporting each other, and persevering. They hold the key to solve the issues of our societies. Instead of looking to academic jargon and to theories that were created within the confines of uneven systems, it is time to step back and elevate the voices that are repeatedly denied. What better way to create accessibility then to ask those who currently don't have access how they would like that process to go? How do we create spaces and policies where people with disabilities, people who are houseless, people who don't have access to utility infrastructure are decision makers and inform how we need to move forward?

In order to truly center those who are oppressed, there needs to be intentional work to foster belonging. These initiatives should take place from the top down with

initiative from the government that could include championing culturally relevant curriculum for the public school system, highlighting the historical contributions of Afro-Colombians and Indigenous people to the nation building project and finally, and finally, celebrating different identities, naming them, taking them seriously.

In addition to this top-down approach, the bottom-up approach from grassroots work is highly influential. As was stated in this work, grassroots organizations have been able to raise awareness and to demand some rights. The combination of having belonging initiatives from the government and the grassroots work will make room for new narratives of the identity of the individual. Inclusive language will be helpful in shining light on the realities of the consequences of the narrative of the SES. Moreover, inclusive narratives will facilitate a new environment in which people who are historically marginalized will be included in the decision-making structure of the country. These shifts are central to reach a more equitable society, a society, with a wider definition of class and belonging in the Colombian imaginary.

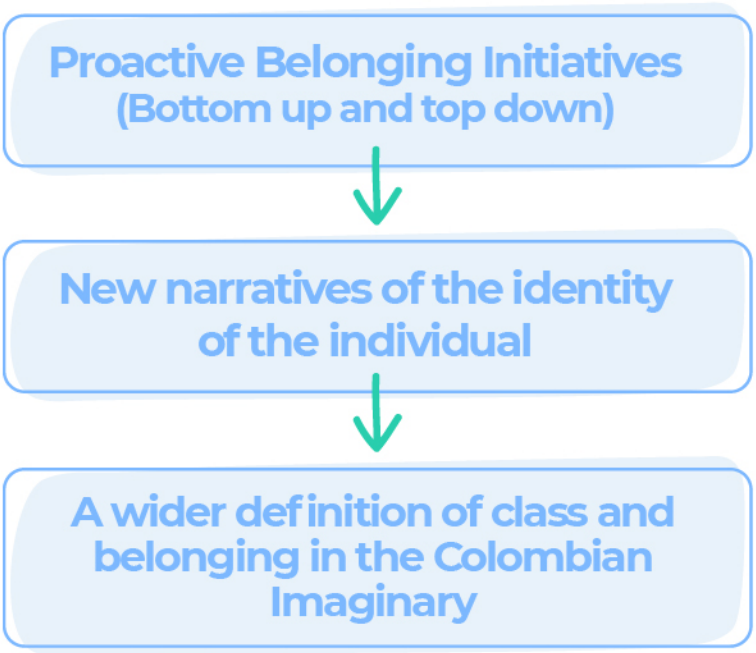


*Figure 59* (González Díez 2021)

When people feel like they belong, the chances of success are higher. They can focus on what matters instead of spending energy trying to fit in. Belonging narratives decrease discrimination. Everyone benefits because there is more collaboration and policies are designed with all members in mind, which means not only are thing more inclusive, but designs are more proactive. Hopefully this translates to societies spending less time being reactive and fixing grievances.

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# BIOGRAPHY

Ana María López Caldwell was born in Bogotá, D.C., Colombia and moved to the United States in her early adolescence. She received her B.A. in Business Administration from Stevenson University. While in college, she founded a non-profit organization called Feed-the-Mind focused on contributing to the education of displaced children in an oppressed neighborhood in Medellín, Colombia. In the spring of 2011, she interned at the Organization of American States (OAS) in the department of Cultural Affairs. She worked as an Admissions Counselor for her alma matter for two years and specialized in recruiting underserved youth from Baltimore City Public Schools. Throughout her career Ana María has demonstrated a desire to work with and support underrepresented students. Additionally, she has been part of various mentorship programs for high school and college students.

Ana María earned an M.A. in Latin American studies at Tulane University and wrote her thesis on the Socioeconomic Stratification System in Colombia. She presented her research at the Southern Political Science Conference in 2015. She has been awarded two FLAS fellowships for the study of Brazilian Portuguese; these included a two year language program and culminated in a summer immersive program in Salvador, Bahia. She has been awarded multiple grants to conduct ethnographic research from the University of New Orleans and Tulane University since 2015. Additionally, Ana María participated in the 2015 Witness for Peace delegation that engaged in political incidence in La Guajíra, Colombia, to advocate for Wayúu and Afro-Colombian victims of capitalists and extractivist practices of the Cerrejón coal mine. She is a member of the Pi Sigma Alpha National Political Science Honor Society. She has attended a variety of conferences in fields ranging from academic, to higher education administration (NACAC), to public engagement (Imagining America).

Ana María has been the Executive Director at Bard Early College in New Orleans since 2018. She is currently also serving as Interim Dean of Studies.