The focus of my scholarly work is on the effects political and social violence have on mental health. The population I focus on is women from the northern triangle of Central America who flee their countries to escape violence only to encounter another form of violence through their migratory journey. My interest on the mental health status and resilience of people that are forced to leave their countries and start a new life was born from personal experience. Growing up, I heard many personal stories from my parents and other Cubans in exile about having to flee their country while not knowing if they would ever be able to return or see their loved ones again. Even knowing this, they chose to flee to a different country in order to have a better life. By building new careers, new friendships, and adapting to a new culture, they were grateful to their host country for the gift of being accepted in a new society, but they also always had a sadness for their loss.

In my first study, I had the opportunity to interview three women from three different Latin American countries who fled their countries and came to the United States in order to survive. To develop a clear understanding regarding why mass migratory movements are often the only means for survival, it is crucial to have context about historical frameworks and ideology within space and time. Cubans fled a communist regime that took away their freedoms and were welcomed as refugees in the United States. Mexicans historically left their country due to economic oppression and needing to find work to provide for themselves and their families. Central Americans, especially those from the northern triangle region, flee to escape political and social violence that has engulfed their countries for several decades.

The narrative of the woman from Honduras opened my eyes and heart to the horror of murder, rape, and kidnappings due to political and social violence. Many people in this region live in extreme poverty and lack economic resources to relocate. Fleeing for their lives includes a hazardous 2,000-mile crossing through Mexico on the way to the United States. Many do not survive and those that do, often do so with scars in their psyche. The migratory path these economically oppressed people from Central America take is very different to the path taken by migrants with money and an education, since many of the latter have visas and come to the United States by plane. These stories led to my strong interest in conducting research with forced migrant populations and my passion to identify barriers that impede these economically oppressed groups. I plan to use the findings to create policy to affect change. My research is unique in that there have been no studies on this population utilizing quantitative analysis to measure the levels of violence during the journey to the United States.

My current research continues to explore nuances of the study I conducted with immigrant women from the northern triangle of Central America. The project collected data on three specific issues, 1) life conditions in their country of origin and their exposure to violence due to civil unrest including wars, gangs, corruption, poverty, which led to their decisions to migrate to the U.S., 2) violence experienced during their journey across Mexico, and 3) current levels of trauma, depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

As a doctoral student, I obtained training in a variety of statistical models for analyzing data and qualitative research designs. The knowledge I gained through using a multi-disciplinary approach to find solutions to problems and mixed methods to find statistical significance in the data helped me capture the emotion of the lived experiences through narratives and phenomenology. I personally conducted
each step of the research including development of interviewing and measurement tools, translations of all materials, interviews of all the participants, and the analysis of data.

For my dissertation titled “Impact of Violence on Mental Health Among Migrant Women from the Northern Triangle of Central America”, I grounded the research in a combination of theoretical frameworks and theories. I utilized migration theories to better understand the flow of migrants to specific countries, postcolonial theory to understand the oppression of the lower classes that give rise to revolutions, and trauma theory to explain how the psyche is harmed both as a result of direct and indirect victimization. Based on review of the literature including historical information and qualitative studies, I developed an interview tool to collect information about family, household, work, education, and specific reasons for migration; and, I also created a tool to measure the level of violence the participants were exposed to. The measurement for “violence” consisted of four parts: exposure as a victim and as a witness both in the country of origin and during the migratory journey through Mexico. In addition, I used four standardized screening tools to measure symptoms of trauma, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. I translated all the interviewing tools into Spanish and interviewed 108 women in Spanish. The interviews were conducted in Texas, Florida, and California. I collected close to 200 variables, some of which were analyzed using a hierarchical regression with a mediation model. I analyzed seven of the variables collected from the research to explore “the mediating effect of trauma on the relationship between violence and depressive symptoms.”. My dissertation research identified that trauma mediates the impact of violence on mental health, and my mediation model indicated that since trauma is an individual perception about a past experience, in this case violence, by changing the perception and eliminating the trauma, depressive symptoms would also be alleviated. Using this premise, social workers and other clinicians can use evidence-based approaches to best assist this population.

This finding has resulted in several presentations including “Impact of Violence on Mental Health Among Migrant Women from the Northern Triangle of Central America” at the Society for Social Work Research Annual Conference in San Francisco last January. At the Council for Social Work Education Annual Program in Denver this October, I will present on “Impact of Violence on Trauma Among Immigrant Women from Central America”. I was invited by the Law Center and the School of Social Work at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge to develop and present “Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health: Immigrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America”, a two-hour module to train attorneys, social workers, and other clinicians who work with immigrants from Central America to understand the levels of violence to properly identify the mental health status of their clients, and make appropriate interventions. In January 2020, I will present “Immigrant Women, Violence, and Economic Oppression” at the Society for Social Work Research Annual Conference in Washington, DC. My article entitled “Effects of Violence Among Migrant Women from Central America” was accepted in the Journal of Social Work Research pending final edits.

My future work will continue to build on my interest with forced migrants that are economically oppressed and come from violent countries. I will continue to focus on the impact of mental health and resilience factors. I will continue to collaborate with Dr. Elizabeth Pomeroy to identify clinical interventions to best assist this population and to partner with the Immigration Clinic at The University of Texas at Austin to provide professional expertise. I plan to apply for immigration research grants from the Charles Koch Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Russell Sage Foundation so I
can continue to develop, implement, and evaluate empirically based research to improve individuals’ psychosocial wellbeing in various settings. For my long-term goals, I will strive to secure R01 funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) or the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). With the current flow of refugee and forced migrations happening all over the world, this same model could be used to explore similarities and differences among other migrant groups, and explore solutions to better assist their needs. Specifically, I am interested in conducting research with forced migrants that make their journey across the Mediterranean Sea to arrive to Europe. I also seek to find collaborators who are looking at this same research and or interventions for this population. I aim to secure an academic position in an institution that supports inter- and transdisciplinary research and education on individuals’ psychosocial wellbeing in social and behavioral health. My future research agenda will continue to examine, evaluate, and assess evidence supported psychosocial interventions for individuals’ overall wellbeing across society.