

# The Growing Venezuelan Diaspora in the United States



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## Historical Background and Perspectives

Venezuela was until recently considered one of the happiest countries in the world. For example, Venezuela was ranked highest along with Tanzania and El Salvador in their happiness means compared to 85 other countries (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011). However, in recent years much has changed for Venezuelans. The World Happiness Report 2017 suggests that happiness in Venezuela has dropped the most of any country between 2005 and 2016, and now ranks 82nd for happiness worldwide (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017). An unprecedented migration from the country characterizes much of Venezuela's recent history, resulting in a growing diaspora. Identifying as a low-income Venezuelan immigrant who is part of the diaspora, a psychologist, and social justice activist presents me a unique lens through which to explore the experiences of Venezuelan immigrants in this chapter. What follows is a brief historical background on Venezuela, details on migration and settlement patterns including a personal migration narrative, a summary of what is known about the migration journey, current demographics of Latinx Venezuelans in the United States, and an in-depth view of the post-migration era, including research studies on post-migration challenges, how Venezuelans maintain cultural values, and what has been effective. The chapter ends with a reflection on how this diaspora may continue to cope and move forward with resilience as individuals and groups in the United States in coming years.

Venezuela is located at the northern end of South America, with an area that is larger than France and Germany combined, and it is open to the Caribbean Sea to the north, bordering Guyana on the east, Brazil to the south, and Colombia to the west (McCoy, Lieuwen, Heckel, & Martz, 2018). Venezuela has many Caribbean

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islands and its diverse physiography includes Andean mountains, llanos (plains), the largest lake in South America (Lake Maracaibo), and the world's highest waterfall (Angel Falls). Venezuela has very large petroleum reserves, and the exploitation of this natural resource catalyzed the urbanization of the country beginning in the 1930s (McCoy et al., 2018).

Venezuela can be considered a diverse country of immigrants, a melting pot of multicontinental DNA (Gómez-Carballa et al., 2012). An estimated population of 30,912,302 individuals reside in Venezuela, which has a population growth rate of 1.28%, net migration of  $-1.2$  migrants/1000 population, and is made up of ethnic groups that include Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, and indigenous peoples (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). Its population is 63.7% mestizo (mixed European and Indigenous), 20% White, 10% Black, and a small indigenous population. Spanish is the language spoken by the majority, and most of its inhabitants adhere to Roman Catholicism, although freedom of religion is a constitutional right (McCoy et al., 2018). Venezuela's economy shifted from agricultural to one that relies primarily on petroleum beginning in the 1940s, which attracted migration of agricultural and professional workers from many Latin American countries as well as European ones such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal, as the country went through a process of intersectoral change (Butzer, Larson, & Mundlak, 2002). In *Café Con Leche*, Wright (1993) offers an in-depth exploration of racial democracy, prejudice, and discrimination in this culturally diverse population. There, Wright argues that people of color of Venezuela did not enjoy the full benefits of a racial democracy and were seen as inferiors by elites that idealized Europeans.

Since its independence from Spanish rule in 1811, Venezuela's political and economic history has not been an uncomplicated one. Much has been written about the crisis of democracy throughout its history (Derham, 2002), and historians have brought attention to the way that racism is entangled in the politics and economics of the country (Salas, 2005). Academics also bring attention to how the current Venezuelan government and its opposition movement use social media to influence public opinion (Forelle, Howard, Monroy-Hernández, & Savage, 2015). In *Venezuela: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Salas, 2015), written in thoughtful depth by a native Venezuelan, a concise chronological view of Venezuela is offered, beginning with Spanish colonialism and focusing on oil and its impact on the country's politics, economy, and culture. In the very critical *Crude Nation: How Oil Riches Ruined Venezuela*, Gallegos (2016) analyzes how a century of mismanagement led to the decline of the oil-rich country and the consequential effects on its people.

## **Migration and Settlement Patterns in the United States, The Author's Narrative**

Family-ties and employment sponsorship are major migration pathways for Venezuelans (Zong & Batalova, 2016), and the recent economic crisis and political turmoil are catalyzing a new exodus from the country (Páez, 2017). This

phenomenon is unpacked in *The Migration Journey*, the next section in this chapter. The migration and settlement patterns of Venezuelans in the United States suggest that they establish themselves in geographical proximity to the country of origin, toward the Southeast of the United States and positioned toward the Caribbean. Indeed, Venezuelans are concentrated in the South of the United States, according to data from the Census Bureau (López, 2015), with about 69% living there, while nearly 9% live in the West, 8% in the Midwest, and 14% have settled in the Northeast in cities such as New York City. A large percentage of Venezuelans live in two states in particular—42% in Florida and 13% in Texas.

### *Author's Personal Narrative*

My migration journey parallels in many ways the migration and settlement patterns of Venezuelans in the United States, and in many ways, they are also different. My parents did not have a college education, both grew up in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, and they were not involved in politics in Venezuela. However, they were both entrepreneurial and resourceful. In the wake of growing economic disparities and lack of employment opportunities, my father immigrated to the United States in 2001. His intent was not to permanently become settled in the United States; rather, as many immigrants do, he intended to work temporarily in order to send remittances to support my mother, my younger brother, and I. After almost 2 years of being away from my father, my mother decided to make a trip to the United States for the holidays so that we could be reunited as a family.

The immigration journey was a risky one that December of 2002. We lived in a city named Mérida, located several hours southwest from the Capital (Caracas), in mountains of the Venezuelan Andes. At the time, my brother was 11 years old and I was 15. We had been out of school for several weeks as the entire country participated in a national strike protesting the government, and most industries and sectors were frozen, including education. We had to travel to the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, the capital, to attend an interview to seek tourist visas. We traveled by bus, against the advice of many, because it was very risky to travel as violent clashes between protesters and the government unfolded in the streets. I remember watching through the window of the bus as we passed by people demonstrating on the streets, tires burning in flames blocking roads, and a heavily militarized presence.

We made it to Caracas, which felt palpably tense. Parts of the city were desolate since people stayed home, refusing to go to work in order to participate in the strike. We made the interview at the Embassy, and it happened to be one of the last interviews before it closed its doors for several months due to the unrest. Luckily, our visas were approved; we could see our father again! My mother was able to put together the funds needed to travel, and we packed for a 1-month trip. I packed some of my most valued items, and said “good byes” to my grandparents, my dog, and friends. I had a feeling I would not see many of them again though we did not plan to stay in the United States past the month.

The trip by plane was exciting, and I got to practice some of my English along the way. We were reunited with our father by Christmas; he was living in Arizona, where he arrived because he had a friend there who could help him. Spending those holidays in 2002 together was one of the happiest moments for our family. To be reunited was invaluable for me as a 15-year-old, even if I was not fully conscious of it then. As January rolled around, the national strike in Venezuela would not let up. My dad enrolled my brother and I in local public schools so that we would not fall behind in our studies although being English language learners posed new challenges as well. The strike intensified and was still taking place when our date to return arrived. With an unknown future in Venezuela, fears of an eventual dictatorship, and hopes of keeping our family together, a decision was made that we would stay in the United States, even if that meant being an undocumented family.

I was fascinated with American pop-culture and was thrilled to stay and learn here. However, the transition was tough for our family. The adjustment was difficult for my brother, who no longer had many of the emotional supports and protective factors we had in Venezuela. He coped by turning to the arts and sports. For my parents, it was difficult to go from working as entrepreneurs and sales associates in Venezuela to working in housekeeping, maintenance, and at factories and restaurants. But they gracefully embraced the challenges of working multiple jobs, forgoing sufficient sleep, and not fully understanding the language and culture. For them it meant that my brother and I would not face even greater hardship as sociopolitical unrest became graver in Venezuela. Together, we faced formidable challenges as a family, as Arizona becoming ground zero in anti-immigrant policies. We faced discrimination, job losses, financial strain, and fears of being detained and deported to a country that was falling apart; but we were together.

The migration experience propelled me to develop a unique place in my family. Because I had some English language skills, I became a sort of ambassador for us, translating for my parents on a regular basis and helping them understand the information they needed to make daily decisions. Realizing the tremendous sacrifices that they made to remain in the United States fueled my motivation to accomplish more in the name of our family. Education was certainly a coping mechanism, protective factor, and strength for me. I knew it was my way out—out of poverty and social oppression. I graduated from high school and went on to the community college and eventually Arizona State University. There, I became involved in the immigrant rights movement, which helped me cope with much of the discrimination and injustices we faced as immigrants. Education and activism gave me a sense of agency for my future and that of others like me.

Through my community work I met my partner and fell in love. She is a US citizen and petitioned for me to become a legal permanent resident and eventually a US citizen. I was extremely lucky, as most undocumented immigrants may not be able to legalize their status under current policies, even if petitioned by a family member. And now, our family is a mixed-status one. My partner and I were able to help my parents become legal permanent residents, thanks to family-unity migration, which is dubbed by anti-immigrant folks as “chain migration.” My brother was too old to qualify for the petition, but he qualified for the Deferred Action for Childhood

Arrivals (DACA). My family is composed of hardworking, contributing members to the US society, culturally and economically. Our home country has deteriorated beyond our worst fears. We worry and are heartbroken for the many people we know there who face poverty, crime, hunger, lack of access to medicine, and intimidation in a waning democracy. My family and I continue to adjust, cope, survive, and move forward together. It is the only way.

## The Migration Journey

Durand and Massey (2010) take a deep dive in explaining the past 30 years of Latin American migration, including Venezuela, toward the United States as well as new streams toward Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, and other Latin American countries. Their report highlights Venezuela's history receiving immigrants from Spain, Italy, and Portugal from the 1940s to 1970s, being a receiver of professional migrants from 1950s to 1980s due to its oil boom, welcoming Cuban immigrants in recent decades, and how it is only until more recently that Venezuela has begun to "push out" citizens, primarily of middle and upper classes due to political and economic reasons.

To fully understand the migration journey of Venezuelans to the United States, it is crucial to understand the reasons for migrating in the first place. Based on data reported by Poushter and Cuddington (2015), most Venezuelans (52%) indicated the country should not follow policies established by the former president (Hugo Chávez); 68% have unfavorable views of the current government and most are also dissatisfied with opposition leaders. Overall, a whopping 85% are dissatisfied with the direction of the country. According to this 2015 report, lack of job opportunities and shortages of basic goods are concerning for 84–85% of Venezuelans. Interestingly, despite difficult diplomatic relationships, 62% of the public continues holding favorable views toward the United States (Devlin, 2014).

As Páez (2017) notes, Venezuela is experiencing its most serious crisis in recent years. Weakened purchasing power, scarcity of food and medicine, growing inflation, and widespread hunger and malnutrition, are all products of the crisis. The sources of the crisis are debatable, and many understand it as being the result of decades of economic mismanagement, low oil prices, growing crime, deterioration of democratic institutions and a move toward authoritarianism. In response to the crisis, about two million people (7% of the Venezuelan population) have left Venezuela since 1999.

A first of its kind research project by Páez, Voice of the Diaspora (*La Voz de la Diáspora*), allowed Páez and colleagues to map the phenomenon and estimate that 90% of those who have emigrated possess university degrees, including 40% having master's and 10% doctorates. About 50% have children, 20% have ties to nationals of the host country, and they see themselves as entrepreneurs. Interviews for this study also suggest that many whose ancestors immigrated to Venezuela in the past are migrating back to their countries of origin (e.g., Spain), and that emigration will continue as the country continues to deteriorate.

It can also be helpful to contextualize migration from Venezuela relative to the risks associated with its geographic location, positioned on the north of South America and facing the Caribbean. Though little has been reported on this topic, it is important to note a research report funded by Ford Foundation and completed at the turn of the century (2000). The report made observations about how Venezuela's geographic location, economic situation, growing poverty, weaknesses in its legal system, and government corruption make it vulnerable to migration and trafficking of women to other countries, such as the United States (Raymond et al., 2002). These conditions can put Venezuelan migrants at risk of exploitation, particularly those who come from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Family-Based Migration

As noted earlier in this chapter, family-based migration and employment sponsorships tend to be significant immigration pathways for Venezuelans to the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2016). However, as political and economic unrest continued to unfold in Venezuela, the number of US asylum applications filed by Venezuelans increased 168% in 2016, and the United States continues to be the top destination for Venezuelan immigrants, with Spain being the second most common destination (Krogstad & López, 2016). In 2017, more than 28,000 Venezuelans applied for asylum in the United States, and thousands more emigrated to neighboring South American countries, which have embraced Venezuelans with mostly welcoming responses, though also with growing anti-immigrant sentiment from right-wing politicians in some countries (Bolter, 2017). For example, new special work authorization visas have been created for Venezuelans migrating to Brazil, Colombia, and Peru; while Panama and Chile recently started requiring visas for Venezuelan to enter these two countries.

## Migration Challenges to the United States

The hopes of escaping a rapidly decaying and chaotic set of circumstances at home in search for a better life in the United States may be frustrated for many Venezuelan immigrants. The current US administration tried to implement multiple travel bans in 2017, with its 3.0 version also targeting individuals from Venezuela along with North Koreans and six Muslim-majority countries. Law scholars have articulated why such methods of extreme vetting are discriminatory, unnecessary, and harmful (Panduranga, Patel, & Price, 2017). A federal district court judge temporarily restrained the ban, siding with the argument that it exceeds the president's authority under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA; Margulies, 2017). Additionally, many have articulated that the inclusion of Venezuela in the travel ban is political as it serves to argue that the travel ban is not motivated by Islamophobia, but to increase

the heat on Venezuelan government officials (Camilleri & Raderstorf, 2017). Nevertheless, how the United States will continue to respond to the dire needs of Venezuelan immigrants remains to be seen, and it could impact the lives of thousands.

## **Current Demographics of Venezuelan Latinxs in the United States**

The Pew Research Center provides updated statistical profiles on the largest Latinx groups in the United States, including Latinxs of Venezuelan origin, based on the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (López, 2015). In the report, Venezuelans are defined as those who indicated having Venezuelan origins, either by being immigrants themselves or tracing back their ancestry to the country. Venezuelans comprise 0.5% of the U.S. Latinx population, being the 13th largest Latinx group in the United States with a population of about 248,000 in 2013. Due to the recent crisis in Venezuela, the population of Venezuelans in the United States is now 321,000 (Flores, 2017). According to López (2015), the population of Venezuelan immigrants (i.e., foreign born) grew by 388% since 1990, to about 170,000. Based on this number, US-born Venezuelan-Americans make up a community of about 78,000 individuals. It is also important to consider demographics of Venezuelan Latinxs within the broader context of U.S. Latinxs, about 57 million and representing 17.6% of the US population, the nation's largest ethnic minority group.

While nearly 70% of Venezuelans in the United States are immigrants, about 23% of them have been in the United States for more than 20 years, and 39% are US citizens. About 70% of Venezuelans report speaking English proficiently, and 85% of them speak Spanish at home. The median age of Venezuelans in the United States is 34 (median age for all Latinx in the United States is 28), the median age of Venezuelan immigrants is 39, and median age of US-born Venezuelans is 15. About 54% of US Venezuelans, 18 years and older, report being married, compared to 57% of Venezuelan immigrants. US Venezuelans' education level is higher than the population of US-born Latinxs and the US population overall. About half of Venezuelans 25 and older have a bachelor's degree, and there seem to be no gaps in college attainment between US-born and immigrant Venezuelans. Almost 45,000 of Venezuelan children ages 5–18 are enrolled in K-12 schools. The median annual income for Venezuelans 16 and older is \$28,000, which is above earnings for all U.S. Latinxs (i.e., \$21,900) and below those of the overall US population (i.e., \$30,000); about 49% are homeowners (López, 2015). There are also Venezuelans with economic struggles; about 18% live in poverty in the United States, and 26% do not have health insurance.

While it is appropriate to consider Venezuelans in the United States as part of the larger Latinx group, it can also be helpful to think of them as being part of the larger group of South American immigrants in the United States. As reported by the



Migration Policy Institute (Zong & Batalova, 2016), South American immigrants experienced the fastest growth among all Latinx groups since 1960. They now compose about 2.9 million of the US population, and 7% of the 42.4 million immigrants in the country. Venezuelan immigrants thus make up 7.6% of the South American immigrant population. They are also part of the 11.6 million South American immigrants scattered around the globe, with 25% of them choosing the United States as their primary destination.

Like Venezuelans, more South American immigrants choose Florida as a place to settle, with New York and New Jersey also being top destinations. Data show that the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach Metro Area accounts for the largest concentration of South Americans (7.8%), including Venezuelans (Zong & Batalova, 2016); Miami is a gateway to Latin America. Venezuelans as most South American immigrants are more likely to be of working age, and they tend to be more educated as are those originating from Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Relatedly, a large share of South American immigrants from these four countries is employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations. Venezuelan immigrants are also part of the group of South American immigrants with the highest median incomes, along with immigrants from Bolivia, Guyana, and Brazil, compared to other South American immigrants. Importantly, family-based immigration is a major vehicle for all South American immigrant groups, including 45% of immigrants from Venezuela. And about 31% of Venezuelan immigrants became green card holders via employment sponsorship.

## The Post-Migration Era Challenges

Not unlike many other groups of immigrants, and specifically Latinx immigrants, Venezuelans face a multitude of challenges in the United States. Dillon, De La Rosa, and Ibañez (2013) studied Latinx immigrants' acculturative stress during the first 2 years in the United States, noting that there is a negative relationship between this period of acculturative stress and family cohesion, with greater decline in family cohesion being experienced by those with undocumented immigration status, lower education levels, and without family in the United States. Thus, it is logical to infer that the period of acculturation may be marked with stress and impacts to the family dynamics of Venezuelan immigrants.

A qualitative study by Shumow (2010) explores how Venezuelans adjust to life in Florida, while remaining connected to their country of birth, and the role that media plays in their having a foot in both worlds. The study acknowledges the growth of multiple forms of media (i.e., newspapers, radio stations, websites, blogs, and internet groups) focused on the Spanish-speaking Venezuelan community in Florida. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of Venezuelan immigrants, who had been in the country between 2 and 17 years, and with an age range from 18 to 60 years. The findings describe a community that is in the early stages of adapting to the country that is coming to terms with the reality of



permanently settling in the United States. They see themselves as being in exile, and a community that is attached to the home country. While they are concerned about events unfolding there, the exile status fosters a sense that they may not return there and abets struggles to connect with one another and overcome divisions that are likely rooted in the home country.

When adjusting to the United States, new challenges that are not that central in the home country may become more salient for Venezuelan immigrants (Guanipa, Nolte, & Guanipa, 2002). These are sociocultural, familial, and intrapersonal challenges and may include the need to speak multiple languages in different environments, learning a new educational system, substituting family systems with institutional ones, and losing socioeconomic and professional status. Acculturation also introduces changing gender roles and family structure, adjustment to more individualistic values, less use of overt humor, more structured time management, adjustment of direct communication style (may be perceived as overconfident or aggressive), and racial issues becoming more concerning. If one is visibly different racially, there is a different response in the United States than one may have experienced in Venezuela.

The challenges that come with transitioning, adjusting, and the process of acculturation to the United States may uniquely affect Venezuelan immigrant children and children of immigrant families. As noted by Hernandez (2004), there is a need in the United States for new policies and programs that are responsive to the needs of immigrant-origin groups living in the country, including Venezuelans, to foster their health, educational success, and well-being. He suggests that nearly 50% of children of immigrant families experience one of four risk factors to well-being and development. These may include: (a) a mother without high school diploma, (b) living in economically depressed conditions, (c) living in linguistically isolated households, and (d) living in a one-parent family.

Venezuelan immigrants' new life in the United States may also be challenged by stereotypes sustained toward this group, as well as stereotypes about Latin Americans and immigrants more broadly. Fant (2012) conducted a study to examine the reciprocal stereotyping of executive employees that worked together for several years. Their findings yielded categorizations of Latin Americans as being bad organizers, socially skilled and easygoing, insufficiently educated, polite, unfocused, enjoyers of life, considerate, elegant, and having low efficiency and low respect for human rights. While the study did not take place in the United States, it is important to consider the stereotypes and broad categorizations that are often placed on Venezuelans and Latin Americans that may also permeate perceptions of these groups in the United States. Moreover, research findings point to generalizations made about Venezuelan females using a confrontational style when engaged in a disagreement and belonging to a positive politeness culture; these findings must be reconsidered, as these generalizations are not fully supported by science (Edstrom, 2004).

Analyses of the status of mental health research in 30 Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries, including Venezuela, highlight that burdensome conditions (i.e., violence, suicide, dementia, and childhood disorders) and vulnerable

populations (i.e., disabled individuals, the elderly, women, children, and people exposed to violence) are understudied (Razzouk et al., 2008). This poses challenges for mental health professionals intending to work with Venezuelan immigrants, since there is a lack of widely available scholarship about mental health challenges faced by Venezuelans and how to address them with effective interventions, policies, or mental health systems. However, it is known that depression is common among the increasing population aged 60 and over, and that a treatment gap exists in countries like Venezuela given weaknesses in primary care services and reliance on private providers (Guerra et al., 2009).

It is remarkable to note that more recent Venezuelan immigrants may find it challenging to transition from a country that faces rampant scarcity to one of overabundance and excess. They may arrive in the United States facing malnourishment, accustomed to rationing basic necessities such as toiletries, and experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress after living in an environment of high sociopolitical and socioeconomic pressure for a prolonged amount of time. There are major gaps in academic scholarship about this topic though popular media has documented how lack of access to medication has led to difficulties in managing symptoms of those with severe mental illness (Casey, 2016). These discrepancies between the country of origin and the receiving country may further complicate the sense of culture shock that accompanies the acculturation period.

## Maintaining Cultural Values, Identity, and Sense of Belonging

Broad cultural generalizations about Venezuelan immigrant families may have little utility given that specific regional, generational, socioeconomic, educational, and idiosyncratic differences may be more relevant on an individual basis, as pointed out by Guanipa et al. (2002). They suggest that the macro-level analysis of values and beliefs needs to be reassessed at the micro-level. With this caution, the authors identify the following common attributes and values of Venezuelan immigrant families: familiarism or “*familismo*,” strong emphasis on social responsibility and the family; family hierarchy, high degree of hierarchical organization and cohesion are normal; matricism and motherism, families are matriarchal and the family centers on the mother and children; humorism, humor is an essential part of the daily lives of Venezuelans, and its use may appear inappropriate or immature to the outsider; and spirituality, historically strong religious foundation and people of powerful faith.

Understanding Venezuelans’ relationship with human rights provides a fuller view of who they are as immigrants, particularly with the contextual awareness of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic unrest that many have endured pre-migration. Recent research (Guédez & Mullet, 2014) concludes that Venezuelans consider that having one basic right (e.g., freedom of speech) is better than having no rights at all, that having a basic right at an intermediate level is not very different than not having the right at all, and that only having all basic rights constitutes having human rights.

In other words, Venezuelans believe that human rights cannot be divided. No studies have explored how Venezuelans hold this aspirational belief as they migrate from a country that many have argued has a government that fractures human rights and democracy (Mijares Peña, 2014) and integrate into US society, where the plight for civil rights, immigrant rights, women's rights, and racial and economic equality is ongoing and continuing to evolve.

Another key element to consider in Venezuelan immigrant families is the importance of having a sense of community. García, Giuliani, and Wiesenfeld (1999) reviewed the literature on the concept of community and its application to community social psychology. In their study, they conducted interviews with residents of a Caracas "barrio," an overpopulated neighborhood inhabited by very low-income individuals. They observed that a sense of community is composed of emotional security, belonging and identity, personal investment, and a system of shared symbols. They also noted that the meaning of community was emphasized in terms of affective elements and values, and that consciousness about the history of the community is vital to forming and maintaining community. One may expect that Venezuelan immigrant families may strive to form new communities and join existing ones in the United States, and that the process of separating from their sense of belonging to a community in Venezuela may be challenging and produce grief.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Venezuelans have a history of strong faith and devotion to the Catholic religion. Research with a Venezuelan sample by Ponton and Gorsuch (1988) notes that extrinsic religiosity is correlated positively with prejudice, while intrinsic religiosity correlated negatively with prejudice, and that parents' nationality was a strong predictor of prejudice. These findings suggest that it is important to consider that Venezuelan immigrants hold their own set of prejudices, while they themselves may be experiencing new discrimination and be prejudiced against as immigrants in the United States. Furthermore, their family's national heritage and religiosity may play a role on Venezuelans' biases. This is particularly salient in the context of the long history of immigration and diversity in Venezuela, meaning that Venezuelans who come from families of immigrants and less religiosity may be less prejudiced than those who had resided in Venezuela for longer or are more religious.

## Venezuelans and Mental Health

Some research has begun to illuminate cultural differences between Venezuelans and their US counterparts. For example, there is research supporting the notion that Venezuelan college students have less positive attitudes toward mental health compared to American students, with Venezuelan women reporting higher psychological openness than males (Nasser Anastas, 2010). Venezuelan children's temperament based on Jung's theory has also been compared to that of US-born children (León, Oakland, Wei, & Berrios, 2009). Findings suggest that Venezuelan children prefer extroverted, practical, thinking, and organized styles; and there are gender differences on thinking-feeling styles and age differences on organized-flexible styles.

Considering Venezuelans' values and beliefs toward the helping professions, particularly psychology, might be helpful for those providing services to this population. Sanchez (1999) provides an overview of what psychology as a field looks like in Venezuela, based on perceptions and opinions of research psychologists. It is possible that Venezuelans' experiences with the field of psychology in their home country may transfer and inform their views and expectations of the field in the United States. Indeed, from research we have examples of how psychological knowledge has been used in Venezuelan politics as well as in projects to improve cognitive functioning (Salazar, 1984). Venezuela has also been a place of focus on community psychology (Montero, 2008; Wiesenfeld, 1998), indigenous psychology (Adair & Díaz-Loving, 1999), and liberation psychology (Montero & Sonn, 2009). Likewise, school psychology has been in practice there for a couple of decades (Oakland, Feldman, & De Viloriac, 1995). Venezuela's national psychological organization is the Federation of Venezuelan Psychologists (<http://www.fpv.org.ve/>), which has existed since 1957.

Vera (2011) concisely highlights that counseling has existed for a long time in Venezuela, beginning in the 1930s, and it has evolved as a profession over the years. Current trends in counseling include legislative efforts granting counselors the ability for independent professional practice, the creation of the Venezuelan Counseling System, and the growing need for counselor training programs to be created by universities in response to the Counseling National System requiring large numbers of trained counselor over the next 10 years. Other concerns relate to certification, supervision, and continuing education. Recent Venezuelan immigrants may have been exposed to some of these trends depending on the access they had to counseling in the home country. This may have implications for how they respond to counseling services in the United States.

## **Effective Strategies in Working with Venezuelan Immigrants**

Guanipa et al. (2002) outlined important considerations to keep in mind when counseling immigrant Venezuelan families, noting that behavioral, cognitive, and solution-focused approaches seem to be most effective approaches. While direct approaches that center on skills building and psycho-education are effective, using integrated, flexible, and multi-modal approaches that look at these families from an ecological-systemic-contextual perspective may also be beneficial. Cultural responsiveness must be foremost. They recommend several questions to consider when assessing Venezuelan immigrants in counseling, cautioning against relying on stereotypes and advocating for a flexible and multicultural paradigm in counseling. Some of the assessment questions suggested by Guanipa et al. (2002) include: "what is the reason for migration and how was the decision made?" "what is the degree of connectedness to the culture and family of origin?" and "what is the role of humor in the family interaction?" Moreover, recent research found art therapy to be effective in enhancing cognitive performance in Latinx older adults from

multiple countries of origin, including Venezuela (Alders & Levine-Madori, 2010). The researchers found that the Therapeutic Thematic Arts Programming (TTAP) method provided a structure for the provider to facilitate person-centered interventions and encourage rapport building, which led to a pattern of emotional disclosures among older adults, particularly among those who did not create art on their own.

Briggs and Mantini-Briggs (2009) studied the effects of Misión Barrio Adentro (MBA), “Inside the Neighborhood Mission,” in providing health services to low income Venezuelans making the use of a “horizontal” process characterized by creative collaborations (i.e., between policymakers, clinicians, community workers, and residents), egalitarian relationships, and involvement in local health committees. Professionals aiming to provide holistic health services to underserved communities of low-income Venezuelan immigrants may find the MBA model to be inspiring, particularly in its focus on “horizontal” collaborations over top-down and bottom-up efforts.

Those interested in working with Venezuelan families with young children may find the work of Daniels, Strom, and Escobar (1986) to be helpful. They developed a parent attitude instrument to assess expectations, interactions, and responses to behaviors by Venezuelan parents of preschoolers. In more recent research, Slipp (2006) studied art therapy services available to children in Caracas via public, private, and non-profit mental health services. The analysis revealed that concerns about ADHD and learning difficulties were strongly represented across mental health service sectors. Other emergent themes reported by Venezuelan service delivery organizations in this study state that many of them focus on post-traumatic stress in response to violence, poverty, and political tension; alcohol abuse, and tackling increased rates of homicide, suicide, and overall mortality. Consequently, US mental health practitioners serving Venezuelans may find it beneficial to obtain training and develop competencies in these emergent concern areas. As has been discussed, US immigrants are experiencing similar tensions as are their peers who remain in Venezuela, thus learning about effective culture-specific interventions would be very useful.

## **Venezuelan Immigrants’ Contributions to the United States**

Research also shows that Venezuelan immigrants are highly entrepreneurial, and this can serve as a protective factor. Indeed, Venezuelans comprise 8% of US immigrant groups founding engineering and technology companies in Florida (Wadhwa, Saxenian, Rissing, & Gereffi, 2007). Educational and workforce development programs that support and nourish this entrepreneurial spirit may be of tremendous benefit in Venezuelan immigrant communities. In addition, Tolbert and McLean (1995) report on the development of a Venezuelan culture assimilator (VCA), designed for US professionals interested in traveling to Venezuela for business. The VCA cross-cultural training contains 20 episodes addressing major cultural norms in Venezuela.

Individuals and organizations interested in career development with Venezuelans in the United States may consider building on the structure of the VCA to develop cultural sensitive training offered to those who provide services or employment to Venezuelans in the United States.

Indeed, notable Venezuelan immigrants and Venezuelan Americans include: Dr. L. Rafael Reif, President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); Gustavo Dudamel, Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; Maria Cristina Anzola, Director of New York City Ballet; William Watkins, CEO of Seagate Technology; Barbara Palacios, TV host, writer, and motivational speaker; Vanessa Neumann, business owner and political theorist; Adriana Cisneros, CEO of Grupo Cisneros; Carolina Herrera, fashion designer; Tina Ramirez, founder of Ballet Hispanico; Joanna Hausmann, social media comedian; Luigi Boria, Mayor of Doral, Florida; Alberto Santos, Mayor of Kearny, New Jersey; Moises Naim, Distinguished Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Nancy Navarro, social activist and appointed by President Obama to the Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence of Hispanics; actor Wilmer Valderrama and innumerable professional sports players, musicians, models, and entertainers.

## **Closing Thoughts: Maintaining Identity and Integrity During the Next 50 Years**

It is my hope that this chapter provided a comprehensive, data-grounded, brief introduction to Venezuelan immigrant families in the United States. A cultural group that was once considered one of the happiest in the planet, Venezuelans are currently facing one of the worst crises in their history. The Caribbean Latin American diverse country of immigrants has endured years of a political tension, mismanagement, and the effects of its economy's overdependence on oil. The current Venezuelan government has continued the practices of the Chavez era, excluding opposition voices. The heart of the country is one of sadness and distress and these sentiments cross the ocean and borders.

This chapter highlighted reports stating that Venezuelans are deeply dissatisfied with the direction of their country and concerned about limited employment opportunities and scarcity of basic goods and healthcare. Those in the United States with family remaining in Venezuela have additional stressors to manage in the post-migration phase. Counselors can consider the loss and grief as a result of immigration model (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981) as they engage with Venezuelan immigrants, recognizing that symptoms of depression are reasonable with the multiple losses they are experiencing.

The research reviewed in this chapter states that as is the case for immigrants in general, the first 2 years post-migration can be very stressful and impactful on family cohesion. Venezuelan immigrants may face new challenges that they are not accustomed to, including language demands, changing of socioeconomic status, communication style differences, and discrimination (e.g., racial, stereotypes).

These challenges can be even more difficult for children, which 50% of Venezuelan immigrants tend to have. Recent immigrants may also experience culture shock and signs of post-traumatic stress.

The lack of scholarship on Venezuelan mental health may make it difficult for professionals to tailor their services. However, it is known that depression is common among elderly Venezuelans, and this likely extends to other age groups given the current situation in the country. There are also noted differences between United States and Venezuelan children and young adults, with children having different temperament preferences, and young Venezuelans having less positive attitudes toward mental health. Nonetheless, Venezuela has been an important location for community and liberation psychology, and the Federation of Venezuelan Psychologists is the official entity of psychologists there. Community psychology and liberation psychology have strong thought pillars in Venezuela, perhaps in response to and a consequence of the decades of racial and economic disparities in the country and region.

Considerations for providing mental health counseling to immigrant Venezuelan families are in existence in the United States (Guanipa et al., 2002), and these include assessment questions to further understand individual experiences. Specifically, Guanipa et al. (2002) recommend a solution-focused, flexible, multi-cultural, and collaborative approach in working with this group of immigrants. Importantly, research notes emergent areas of concern for Venezuelans, including violence, poverty, political tension, alcohol abuse, and death/grief in the face of increased mortality rates. It is imperative that U.S. Latinx and non-Latinx mental health professionals work together to develop culture-specific competencies in these areas in order to guide and support the ethical delivery of services to Venezuelan immigrant families.

Research reviewed in this chapter also emphasizes just how important it is for Venezuelans to feel a sense of community and belonging. Undoubtedly, it will be important for Venezuelan immigrant families in the United States to continue to work through their divisions in order to form a strong community that ensures the preservation of its values and its integrity as they remain settled in the United States. Perhaps Venezuelans can reclaim a high sense of happiness by contributing their unique identity, values, and education to the large and diverse US population, a country that is enriched by communities of immigrants.

Venezuela's late Simón Díaz, a Grammy Award-winning singer of "*musica llanera*," composed the folk song *Caballo Viejo*. Part of its lyrics say "*Caballo le dan sabana porque está viejo y cansao, pero no se dan de cuenta que un corazón amarrao cuando le sueltan la rienda es caballo desbocao.*" In essence, this portion of the lyrics mean that even an old and tired horse is boundless, when unchained and freed in the plains. These lyrics may very well capture the spirit of the recent Venezuelan immigrant, which can indeed be boundless when liberated to pursue its aspirations elsewhere, even after the tiresome distress it has faced historically. As mental health and human service providers, it is up to us to promote the healing and liberation of Venezuelan immigrants in the United States, so that this diaspora can once again be happiness bound.



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