

Important Considerations in the Counseling Process of Immigrant Venezuelan Families

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Recent increases in the number of Venezuelan immigrant families in the United States and/or Canada have contributed to the need for developing effective assessment and counseling strategies to help this population integrate into their new environment. Assessment of Venezuelan families may be achieved effectively when therapists are able to delineate, without stereotyping, the contribution of culture to the presenting complaint and symptomatology. This article presents therapeutic considerations relating to Venezuelan families. Guidelines for gathering clinical information are discussed.

Recent increases in the number of Venezuelan immigrant families in the United States is contributing to a need for the development of effective assessment and counseling strategies to help this population successfully integrate into their new environment.

Little research has been conducted exploring similarities and differences among Hispanic families (Flores & Carey, 2000). The literature that does exist, however, indicates that most Hispanic families share similar characteristics (Aponte, Young-Rivers, & Wohl, 2000; Falicov, 1998; Marin & Marin, 1991; Zuniga, 1994). The majority of this research has focused on three groups; Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans, the three Hispanic populations that have been considered to have a longer history of immigration

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the NCFR Annual Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 1998.

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(Marin et al., 2000). At present in the U.S. and Canada, there is a dearth of research relating to Venezuelan families and their immigration process. One possible reason for this is that Venezuelans immigrating in large numbers to the United States and/or Canada is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1990, 40,433 Venezuelan immigrants were officially reported by the Census Bureau to be in the United States (Census Bureau, personal communication, April 25, 2001). On August 2000, a representative for the Venezuelan consulate in Miami stated that they do not have recent statistics on the number of Venezuelan immigrants in the United States, however approximately 175,000 are considered to be in Miami alone (Miami's Venezuela Consulate, personal communication, August 28, 2000). The other consulates around the country were not able to provide further information. This anecdotal information suggests that the number of Venezuelan immigrants in the United States is increasing.

While Venezuelans share certain common characteristics, such as language and, in some cases, religion and culture with other Hispanics, their history, patterns of immigration, rich natural resources, and level of education make them slightly different among Hispanics. In order to provide more effective treatment, it is important for therapists to become familiar with culture specific characteristics of this population. This article will present some considerations relating to immigrant Venezuelan families and this group's subtle and specific differences.

The characteristics presented here do not intend to stereotype or categorize Venezuelan families or any other Hispanic family. They simply provide a general framework to help therapists understand Venezuelan culture and how it impacts immigrant Venezuelan families. Therapists need to be cautioned, however, that behaviors sometimes attributed to cultural differences reflect only socioeconomic and/or educational differences (Comas-Díaz, 1989).

VENEZUELA TODAY

With a population of approximately 22.3 million (U.S. Dept. of Transportation, 2000), one of the highest per capita income levels (prior to the floods of 1999), and vast cultural and geographic diversity with a long history of racially mixed marriages, Venezuela was once one of the more desired places to live in South America. In fact, Venezuelans often proudly say, "Venezuela un país para querer [Venezuela is a country to love]." This pride in their heritage and the lack of Venezuelan immigration history (living outside Venezuela) sets Venezuelans apart from some other Hispanics, who, according to research, tend to disparage their own ethnic group, particularly when suffering from political mistreatment (Brachfield, 1953).

The "stable" democratic political system in Venezuela, its economic productivity, and the historical-religious-geographical richness of the coun-

try have also made Venezuelans different than other Hispanics. Sadly, due to years of administrative abuse of power, uneven distribution of wealth, and mismanagement of resources, Venezuela today is a country in which its citizens can no longer easily live comfortably or achieve the aspirations they want for themselves and their children. Consequently, they are immigrating to Canada and the United States.

SOME ATTRIBUTES OF VENEZUELAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Two points need to be emphasized before generalizing about Venezuelan cultural family patterns. First, broad cultural generalizations do not do justice to specific regional, generational, socioeconomic, educational, and idiosyncratic variations in lifestyles found in Venezuelan families. Thus, description and analysis of values, beliefs, and rules, that may be acceptable at the macrosocial level, need careful reanalysis and qualification at the microsocal level. Second, cultural rules tend to refer to the public reality of how relationships or behaviors “ought” to be. These internalized behavioral perceptions sometimes do not coincide with private realities, which is how things really are for each family internally (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996). Both public (cultural) and private (idiosyncratic) rules govern family life and interact to make every family unique and special. Therefore, both public and private aspects need to be assessed in family therapy. In addition, within-group differences need to be considered (Moreno, 1995). When working with Venezuelan families, therapists may need to understand the following characteristics, which predominate in Venezuelan family systems: familiarism, family hierarchy, matricism and motherism, humorism, and religious devotion.

Familiarism

Generally, just as with other Hispanic/Latino families, Venezuelans place a strong emphasis on the importance of sharing a collective social responsibility and the importance of the family or “familiarismo” (Carballo-Dieguez, 1989; Falicov, 1998). This concept of familiarism includes much more than the immediate family. Grandparents are considered an integral and important part of the family. Aunts, uncles, their children, and even more distant relations are also considered part of what is known as the “extended family.” Then, as Carballo-Dieguez (1989) points out, there are the “padrinos and madrinas,” people who are very close to the family because they are the godparents of a child or because they are good and old friends.

This family system has positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, family relationships can be very rewarding and there is always a family member available to offer help and support in times of crisis. On the negative side, this structure often interferes with privacy and family boundaries. All family members know most or some of the business of everybody else

and they feel entitled to make their opinion known. They may even apply some pressure to influence other family member's life decisions. Thus, interdependency, from the intergenerational point of view, characterizes the family.

To facilitate functioning of the family network, families stress affiliation and cooperation, while confrontation and competition are minimized. Collectivism is preferred over individualism (Carballo-Diequez, 1989; Falicov, 1998; Padilla, 1981). The degree of interdependency is affected also by education, acculturation, socioeconomic conditions, stage of culture shock, ethnic identity development, and the family life cycle (Comas-Díaz, 1989).

Family Hierarchy

In Venezuelan families, as in many other Hispanic families, both a high degree of hierarchical organization and cohesion are normal. Patterns of interaction in most families are characterized by generational interdependency and loyalty to the family of origin. High levels of affective resonance, interpersonal involvement, and a tendency for individuals to live in the family of origin of procreation (at home with parents) at every developmental stage, are common characteristics of this ethnic group.

In spite of the high degree of emotional closeness and interdependency, hierarchies and roles are clearly defined (McGoldrick, 1998). Furthermore, roles are organized around age, gender, and sometimes education. Age is one of the most important determinants of authority, with the eldest being attributed the greatest authority. In the Venezuelan system, the family protects the individual and it demands loyalty. The values of family proximity, cohesiveness, and respect for parental authority are present throughout an individual's life cycle. Honesty and the preservation of dignity are fundamental values in most Venezuelan families (Padilla, 1981; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996).

Matricism and Motherism

Venezuelan families are matriarchal in that the "core of the world" or focus center of the family is the mother and children. While fathers are, socially and economically, the heads of the family, mothers are the primary caregivers, mediators, and basic decision-makers within the family unit. The mother's role is so important in fact, that children young and old must place their mother as a priority, ahead of all other family members, such as a sister, a husband, wife, or a father. A popular expression that is very representative of this ideology and value is, "Madre no hay más que una, padre puede ser cualquiera" or "Mother is only one, father could be anyone."

Humorism

Humor is an essential part of daily living in Venezuela. For those unfamiliar with the culture, the Venezuelans' use of humor may appear inappropriate

or immature. For instance, in a therapy session a husband might call his wife “*gordita*” (little fatty, which has nothing to do with weight) or “*negra*” (black one, which has nothing to do with skin color). In the United States and/or Canada, some might view these words as pejoratives. Yet for the Venezuelans, they are terms of endearment, and are often used in a humorous manner. Therefore, therapists need to understand that the use of humor may not necessarily mean clients are using a defense mechanism to protect themselves from expressing feelings. Humor is simply a common way to relate among family members and reflects the generally optimistic philosophy of life that prevails among Venezuelans. It is the responsibility of the therapist, therefore, to identify which issues are culturally versus clinically relevant.

Religious Devotion

Venezuelans historically have a strong religious foundation. Their religious legacy has made them a people of powerful faith. They have strong beliefs in religion and destiny and this is constantly present in therapy. Clinicians need to be able to use this belief system to help the families’ process of healing and their therapeutic progress.

VENEZUELAN IMMIGRANTS

To better comprehend Venezuelan families in transition, it is important to understand what the characteristics of Venezuelans are within the context of their culture of origin and their patterns of immigration. To do this, a framework must be developed. Some patterns for consideration are: a) Pursuit of higher educational level and better opportunities, b) Mixed marriage, c) Voluntary immigrants, and d) Involuntary immigrants

MIGRATION PATTERNS FOR VENEZUELAN FAMILIES

A major difference between Venezuelan and other Hispanic patterns of immigration is that many Venezuelans have prior experience living in the United States and/or Canada. There are other differences as well. For example, typically families immigrating from México, Central America, or other South American countries, come to the United States and/or Canada to escape poverty, persecution, and/or to get a basic education (Ingoldsby & Smith, 1995). However, Venezuelan families are normally middle class, rarely politically persecuted, and aspire to continue education at a undergraduate or graduate level.

Nonetheless, just like other Hispanic/Latino families, immigrant Venezuelan families may develop a variety of stress problems that can diminish their ability to cope with their new environment. The degree of difficulties may be affected by some of the following issues: pattern of immigration, the family

developmental stage, the acculturation process, the level of differentiation from family of origin, invisible loyalties, previous experiences and traumas, and the individual psychological constitution.

Pursuit of Higher Educational Level and Better Opportunities

The development of an International Scholarship program by the Venezuelan government and the existence of different educational exchange programs in the country have facilitated access to international education. Many Venezuelans living abroad have come first to Canada or to the United States to receive an education. They may decide to stay in their new country or return to Venezuela. The characteristics of this pattern of immigration are very special. This population may speak the “new” language and they may be prepared to work. This migration pattern is different than that of other Hispanic/Latino groups who may have never experienced living in the United States and/or Canada previous to immigration to these countries.

Mixed Marriage

Some Venezuelans, while studying in the United States and/or Canada, end up marrying a “local.” As a member of an interracial marriage, this population, in most cases, speaks the language and has more economic accessibility. In therapy, some of these clients may focus directly on their cultural differences, many might not. Invisible loyalties and confused identity may play an important role in understanding these families. Therefore, therapists need to be cautious in differentiating cultural issues and the intra/interpersonal realities of the couple/family life cycle.

Voluntary Immigrants

Voluntary immigrants are individuals who have freely decided to move abroad. They may be a product of occupational success or may have decided to invest in a new country or look for a better future (Nieto, 2000). In general, this population is better prepared psychologically than other types of immigrants to adapt to a new location. Nevertheless, there are certain complexities of cultural integration for this particular group. This pattern of immigration can be legal or illegal.

Involuntary Immigrants

Involuntary immigrants are people who have been forced to leave their country of origin due to personal, economic, or political failure (Nieto, 2000). Some have requested refugee status, which may be difficult to obtain due to Venezuela’s history of democracy and economic productivity (3D Atlas, 1998). Still, some families may be involuntarily displaced, often fleeing under con-

ditions over which they have minimal or no control. They often move from one country to another (McGoldrick, 1998), developing a continual sense of physical, psychological, and emotional “homelessness” (McGoldrick, 1998). They are immigrating with the hope to rebuild their lives and are generally suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Ingoldsby & Smith, 1995).

These four patterns of immigration need to be explored and considered when working with Venezuelan families. They also need to be understood. Therapists must develop a sense of acceptance and respect for each family’s way of integrating their new culture into their lives. Differences in acculturation between Venezuelan and other Hispanic groups must also be considered (Flores & Carey, 2000).

In order to best understand immigrant families, it is also important to be aware of how the characteristics of Venezuelans in their country of origin may change once they migrate to the United States and/or Canada. (See Table 1.)

It should be noted that, if they have been in the country before, immigrant Venezuelan families will most likely experience the stages of culture shock (honeymoon, anger and resentment, adjustment, and integration [multilingual and multicultural]) again, (Olberg, 1958). One characteristic unique to this group, however, is that they may suffer reentry culture shock due to the change in status from foreign student to immigrant.

TABLE 1. Venezuelan Families Changes Due to Immigration

Families in Venezuela	In the new country
Speak only Spanish at home	May speak more than one language due to environment (home—Spanish; work, school—“new” language(s))
Place great value in obtaining international education	May have already experienced educational systems of US and/or Canada
Nuclear and extended family system are pronounced	Family system may be substituted with an institutional system
Education enables advancement in socioeconomic and professional status	May lose socioeconomic and professional status
Clearly defined gender roles: Mothers are first, decision-makers, caregivers, peace-keepers, etc.	Gender roles and family structure may change due to environment. The father may take over traditional mother roles
Family has a collective orientation with emphasis on community relationships	Family may become more individualistic with fewer community relationships
Family members use humor freely and overtly	Family members may use humor less overtly due to fear of negative perception by indigenes
Time management is flexible	Time management is more structured
Use direct communication	Direct communication style may be seen as overconfident or aggressive
Little concern with racial issues	Racial issues become of more concern

GEOGRAPHICAL AND LIFESTYLE INFLUENCES ON VENEZUELAN IMMIGRANTS

The value and belief systems of immigrant families are essential to understand them, but geographical and socioeconomic influences are as well. Families that have lived in a small city with less influence of a stressful modern life or transculturation may tend to have more interdependency than those that have lived in big cities with a higher level of modernization. For example, people that come from Caracas have more than likely been exposed to a higher level of "First World" influence. These families may have some differences in their way of functioning than people who come from Coro, a small traditional city on the west of Venezuela (Moreno, 1995). The family who has had the opportunity to live abroad may have suffered some changes in the preservation of the Venezuelan traditional values.

COUNSELING PROCESS OF IMMIGRANT VENEZUELAN IN THE UNITED STATES AND/OR CANADA

In working with immigrant families, specifically Venezuelan families, behavioral, cognitive, and solution-focused approaches appear to be most effective (Guanipa, Talley, & Rapagna, 1997; McKinley, 1987). The rationale for this is that behavioral approaches allow clients to participate actively in the changing of their environment, and consequently, in achieving some control. Additionally, this type of intervention centers on skills building and is more psycho-educational.

Direct approaches appear to be more practical and may satisfy the need for swift integration of Venezuelan families into their new communities. This does not suggest that these approaches are the only way. In fact, several authors (Gibson, 1983; Guanipa-Ho & Talley, 1997) propose that an integrated approach could be beneficial, since it would look at Venezuelan clients from an ecological-systemic-contextual perspective. Similarly, other authors suggest a multimodal approach, which utilizes a model flexible enough to allow therapists to adapt to different ethnic groups (Ponterotto, 1987; Ponterotto, Casas, Susuki, & Alexander, 1995). In summary, therapists need to be open to different approaches and able to integrate different strategies to achieve the most positive results for the family.

ASSESSMENT OF THE FAMILY

When counseling Venezuelan families, therapists who are able to develop a paradigm based on flexibility, creativity, and respect for their clients may have more successful outcomes. A therapist who sees normality in multicultural identities and has a sense of altruism, sensitivity, and cultural awareness,

combined with a genuine desire to help, without judgmental or biased pre-conceptions of the ethnic group, may also increase chances for success (Baptiste, 1987).

When evaluating Venezuelan families, the following questions may be helpful in gaining a systemic understanding of family reality:

- What is the reason for migration and how was the decision made?
- What is the migration phase associated with the family?
- What is the degree of connectedness to the culture and family of origin?
- What is the differentiation between the stresses of migration and differences in cultural values and family development?
- What was the time of migration?
- What are the invisible obligations that may be affecting the family?
- What are the beliefs of family members about themselves and about each other, which maintain and are maintained by the structure of the system?
- How do these beliefs differ from the beliefs held in the country of origin?
- What was the socioeconomic level before and now?
- What are the previous traumatic experiences and their effects on the present?
- What are the family's expectations and their congruence with present reality?
- Are there any extended family members living with them?
- What are the family beliefs about therapy and what are their expectations?
- What is the patient's namesake? (Many Venezuelans are named after a family member. Identifying such a relative, and knowing her/his history, may be very helpful in understanding or clarifying the client's role or family's conflict.)
- What are the beliefs and fears of the family about the new country?
- What are the double/ambivalent messages about integrating with the new culture sent to the children?
- What are the religious and cultural beliefs of the family?
- How do gender roles have to be accommodated to the new reality and how do these affect the family dynamics?
- What are the childrearing beliefs and how are they affecting the children?
- What is each family member's relationship with the external world?
- What are family beliefs about mental health?
- How does each family member define the etiology of the present complaint?
- Has the family searched for help before?
- What has been of help before for the family and what did not work and why?
- What are the family beliefs about solving the "difficulties"?
- How does each family member identify their ethnic identity?
- What are the effects of the level of acculturation in the family interaction?
- What are the family cultural healing methods and how can they be integrated or used in therapy?

- What is the degree of loss?
- What is the family definition of physical health?
- What are the family members' attitudes towards their ethnic group and culture?
- What are the family members' feelings or conceptions about the host culture?
- What is the role of humor in the family interaction?

Therapists may assist Venezuelan families by discussing conflict resolution skills, presenting alternatives, presenting concrete homework, providing information and access to resources, giving hope, and discussing with them the advantages and disadvantages of their present behaviors. In general, when Venezuelan families initially come for therapy, most family members want concrete solutions; however, after joining with the family and solving the crisis, therapists can help them to understand the problem in a deeper and systemic manner. Whichever therapeutic modalities are used, tactfully establishing clear boundaries and creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust will greatly enhance the overall success of therapy.

CONCLUSION

A key to the effective counseling of Venezuelan families, or any ethnic group, is the ability and desire of therapists to understand their own cultural reality and that of the family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1998; McGoldrick, 1998; Pedersen, Dragus, Lonner, & Trimble, 1996). In working to become culturally responsive, professionals need to be particularly sensitive to biases in relation to others, whether from one's own culture or from a different one (Cheatham, 1994). It is apparent that successful counseling of Venezuelan families depends on the capacity of therapists to develop credibility through curiosity, flexibility, adaptation, open-mindedness, and creativity in the use of techniques and approaches that are well founded and coherent. These techniques need to be suitable not only for the cultural group as a whole, but for the individual/family as well.

Family therapists need to be aware about the danger of developing only one set of normative behaviors. They need to observe the verbal and non-verbal behaviors, which are normative in any family idiosyncratic and cultural framework, as well as within-group differences. Lack of this skill can contribute to misdiagnosis, inaccurate conceptualization of the problem, and an ineffective treatment plan. Hence, behavioral patterns observed in Venezuelan families need to be considered as a general framework that can benefit from further exploration at the level of the internal and external family system.

As Venezuelan families continue to immigrate (documented or undocumented), their integration into their new environment may produce social

changes. Research is needed to understand how to best benefit from, and most effectively work with and help this group of new immigrants. Research focusing on the family lives of Venezuelans may help us to develop new policies, interventions, and strategies to understand other ethnic families.

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