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Cultural stress and psychological symptoms in recent Venezuelan immigrants to the United States and Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The present study was designed to compare cultural stressors, psychological distress, and their interrelationships between recent Venezuelan immigrants in the United States and in Colombia. Cultural stress theory suggests that immigrant groups in receiving contexts that are more culturally similar to them would report less discrimination, and a less negative context of reception, compared to immigrant groups settling in countries that are more culturally dissimilar. We therefore hypothesized that recent Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia would report less cultural stress, and less psychological distress (depressive and anxiety symptoms), compared to recent Venezuelan immigrants in the US.

Method: A sample of 647 Venezuelan immigrants (78% had migrated within one year prior to assessment) completed surveys assessing perceived discrimination, negative context of reception, depressive symptoms, and anxiety symptoms.

Results: Contrary to expectations, Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia reported significantly ($p < .05$) greater discrimination, a worse context of reception, and more depressive symptoms, compared to their counterparts in the US. Mediation models indicated that a negative context of reception was related to depressive and anxiety symptoms indirectly through experiences of discrimination.

Conclusion: The mean differences contradict what cultural stress theory would predict, and suggest that mechanisms other than cultural similarity and dissimilarity may be responsible for the observed differences. However, the structural relationships among these factors are consistent with theory.

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Introduction

Worldwide rates of international migration are at their highest levels in recent history. More than 250 million people currently reside in countries other than where they were born (United Nations, 2017). Nearly every country either sends emigrants to other nations, receives immigrants from other nations, or both. Some immigrants move in search of economic opportunities or to reunite with friends and family members, whereas others do so to escape violence or political persecution, whereas others are relocated involuntarily (Castles & Miller, 2003; Steiner, 2009).

Large waves of immigration are often not received well within the destination society. Cultural stress theory suggests that mass immigration activates processes of threat and defense in non-immigrant members of the receiving society (Schwartz, Meca, Cano, Lorenzo-Blanco, & Unger, in press). Such threats can include discriminatory laws, “cold-shoulder” receptions, and formal and informal policies intended to limit use of immigrant languages in public places. In turn, immigrants may perceive that they are being discriminated against, and that they are not welcome in the countries or regions in which they have settled (Cano et al., 2015; Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2016). This perception of being unwelcome, along with being denied opportunities that are available to others, is referred to as *negative context of reception* (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). A similar but distinct cultural stressor, *discrimination*, refers to being called names, threatened, disparaged, or attacked because of one’s racial, ethnic, or national background (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009).

Rudmin (2003) contends that the amount of defensiveness displayed by receiving-society individuals toward an immigrant group, and perhaps consequently the extent of discrimination and negative context of reception that the immigrants perceive, is influenced by the amount of similarity versus difference between the immigrant group and the receiving society. Such similarities and differences may take the form of language, religion, and other group characteristics that clearly distinguish the immigrants from the society in which they are settling (Steiner, 2009). Other factors are also likely to influence defensiveness, including the presence of an overarching narrative of the nation (e.g., “the United States is based on an Anglo-Protestant heritage”), implicit or explicit biases toward particular racial or ethnic groups, and prior experiences with large-scale immigration (Waters & Jiménez, 2005).

Cultural stressors are unsettling to immigrants and other minority groups because they convey a sense of being unwanted (Cobb, Xie, Meca, & Schwartz, 2017). Not surprisingly, then, cultural stress theory also holds that discrimination, negative context of reception, and other stressors are related to increased risk for symptoms of anxiety and depression among immigrants (Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2015). Research has found that cultural stressors may lead to anxiety and depressive symptoms among Hispanics by impairing adaptive coping mechanisms (Driscoll & Torres, 2013), leading individuals to withdraw from attempts to control or alter their life circumstances (Chithambo, Huey, & Céspedes-Knadle, 2014), and activating symptoms of traumatic stress (Torres & Taknint, 2015). Symptoms of anxiety and depression are critical to examine as outcomes because these are two of the most common mental health problems and lead to considerable morbidity and mortality, including suicide (World Health Organization, 2017).

The case of Venezuelan immigration to the United States and Colombia

In the present study, we test components of cultural stress theory within the context of Venezuelan migration to the United States (US) and Colombia. Venezuela has emerged as a new and critically important source of immigrants to the US and to other Latin American countries, including Colombia. Estimates indicate that more than 1.5 million Venezuelans—roughly 5% of the nation’s total population—have left the country since 1999 (Páez, 2015) and that the bulk of Venezuelan youth (69%) and adults (58%) who remain in Venezuela wish to emigrate (Datincorp, 2016). Thousands of Venezuelan émigrés have relocated to neighboring Colombia (Wyss, 2017); however, the US has been, and remains, the top destination country for Venezuelans, with the majority settling in South Florida (Pew Research Center, 2016). This exodus is driven by a number of factors, including widespread political corruption and government repression (Human Rights Watch, 2016), rapidly-increasing economic instability and soaring inflation (Borger, 2016), and a homicide rate that places Venezuela among the world’s most violent nations (United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime [UNODC], 2014).

Large-scale emigration from Venezuela is a new phenomenon that is largely influenced by the nation’s ongoing crisis. Venezuela has long been—and was until quite recently—a nation that *received* large numbers of immigrants and was one of the wealthiest countries in Latin America (Darnnton, 2014; Durand & Massey, 2010). However, at present, the country’s sociopolitical and economic reality is such that hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans have left their once prosperous homeland. Notably, many Venezuelan emigrants are highly educated, a characteristic that makes them unique as compared to emigrants from most other Latin American countries. Specifically, in the US, it is estimated that half (50%) of Venezuelan immigrant adults to the US are college graduates, as compared with only 6% of Mexican and 21% of Cuban immigrant adults (Lopez & Patten, 2015).

Venezuelan immigration to the US and Colombia allows us to conduct a multi-country evaluation of cultural stress theory, in terms of similarities and differences between immigrants’ experiences in the two destination countries. Colombia and Venezuela were once part of a single nation, and there has been a great deal of trade, cultural exchange, and prior migration (mostly from Colombia to Venezuela) between the two countries (Darnnton, 2014). On the other hand, although the US has a long history of immigration, it is well documented that many Americans hold biases toward Hispanic immigrants (Dovidio, Gluszek, John, Ditlmann, & Lagunes, 2010), and many Hispanic immigrants in the US report experiences of identity-based discrimination (Salas-Wright, Robles, Vaughn, Córdova, & Pérez-Figueroa, 2015). Further, there are important linguistic differences to be highlighted. Spanish is the official language of both Colombia and Venezuela. Although South Florida, where many Venezuelans immigrating to the US are settling, is heavily Hispanic, professional occupations (for which many Venezuelan immigrants are qualified) in the US generally require English

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