BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO VENEZUELAN REFUGEE PROFESSIONALS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH FLORIDA: A CASE STUDY

A Dissertation

by

DEYANIRA GARCIA ZEA

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Chair of Committee,	Larry Dooley
Committee Members,	Khalil Dirani
	Patricia Goodson
	Christine Stanley
Head of Department,	Mario Torres

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ABSTRACT

The deteriorating social, economic and political conditions in Venezuela have triggered an unprecedented refugee crisis. To date, over five million Venezuelans have fled the country to Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe. In the United States, the number of refugees and asylum seekers from Venezuela has reached record high levels.

Many of these refugees are professionals with academic degrees and experience. The purpose of this single case study was to explore the barriers and facilitators Venezuelan refugee professionals encountered when intending to resume their careers and work in their professions in South Florida, United States. I conducted 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Venezuelan refugee and asylum-seeking professionals with extensive work experience in five professions: business administration, civil engineering, education, human resources, and veterinary medicine. I also interviewed the program director and program coordinator of two federally-funded college programs directed toward helping refugees advance their careers.

My findings suggested the non-recognition of their foreign qualifications, stringent government policies, costly recertification processes are some of the major barriers for these foreign trained professionals. While social capital, resilience, personal agency and bilingualism (Spanish and English) facilitate refugees' integration in South Florida's communities.

The role and effort of Human Resource Development as a change agent should first be aimed at the more macro, national level by influencing refugees' policy reforms for career advancement. Adequate public policy reforms would translate into major benefits for the United States and for refugee professionals seeking to receive the equivalence of their qualifications, contribute to the economy, and stop the depreciation of their human capital.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to God for blessing my life, for guiding me throughout my existence, and for being my pillar of strength in times of difficulty and weakness.

To my parents for their unconditional love, dedication, and sacrifice to make me the person I am today. You always motivated me to go after my dreams and achieve my goals. Many of my achievements I owe to you, including this one.

To my brother Roberto and my sister Diomiris for their love and support throughout this process. To all my family members and friends for your prayers, advice and words of encouragement.

To my beloved Venezuela, my homeland, my nostalgia and my inspiration. To all Venezuelans, those who have been forced to leave their land and everything behind and those who have stayed and with unparalleled courage continue the fight for democracy and freedom.

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My gratitude to my participants, the Venezuelan refugee and asylum seeking professionals who endured the hardship of starting all over in a new land, for their willingness to cooperate with me and have their voices heard. Finally, my heartfelt gratitude to the United States of America for providing protection to Venezuelans who have been victims of oppression, persecution and torture, and for giving them the opportunity to start life anew.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Dr. Larry Dooley, Dr. Khalil Dirani, Dr. Christine Stanley of the Educational Administration and Human Resource Development Department, College of Education at Texas A&M University, and Dr. Patricia Goodson of Department of Health & Kinesiology at Texas A&M University.

All other work conducted for this dissertation was completed by the student independently.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

LIST OF TABLES

Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Refugees are individuals who flee their country of origin for fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (U.S. Department of State, n. d.). Refugee populations continue to increase worldwide while host countries struggle to find solutions to support their assimilation.

Refugee professionals can make significant contributions in the host country, however, professional associations and employers in developed countries under-evaluate the local qualifications and experiences of refugees, especially if they come from non-English speaking countries. Equally important is the lack of credential recognition, which adds more difficulty to an already complex situation (Chiswick & Miller, 2009).

The growing population of immigrant professionals and refugees and the contributions they could make to the host country faces numerous challenges with the potential to influence their career trajectories. Further, refugee professionals may be treated differently for reasons other than their skills, such as ethnic origin, language, religion, and large cultural differences (Syed, 2008). To prevent skill underutilization, it is important to study career experiences of refugee professionals in the host country. "Very few studies have examined refugees' vocational behavior, including seeking employment, overcoming work-related challenges and traumata, and navigating careers after leaving their home country" (Newman et al., 2018).

The Statement of the Problem

The socioeconomic and political crisis taking place in Venezuela has triggered the massive emigration of its citizens to Latin America, the Caribbean, North America and Southern Europe (Labrador, 2019). It is considered the largest-recorded refugee crisis in the Americas in

the last 50 years. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) reported the number of asylum requests from Venezuelans tripled in 2018 (USCIS, 2019).

Despite the increasing numbers of applications, presently, there is a dearth of information about how schooling, work experience, and formal skills acquired in Venezuela shape and impact the professional careers of Venezuelan refugee professionals in the U. S. This is crucial since the ability to transfer human capital skills at the international level is the essence of the refugees' assimilation and integration processes (Chiswick & Miller, 2009). For obvious reasons, language ability of the host country is always mentioned in the literature as one of the most defining success factors for any refugee or immigrant, but it is unknown how other factors facilitate or challenge the assimilation process of Venezuelan refugee professionals.

The United Nations (UN) News Migrants and Refugees (2020) reported the number of Venezuelans fleeing their country has surpassed the 5.3 million mark, as of December 2020. Globally, Venezuelans are one of the single largest population groups displaced from their country.

The Significance of the Study

Due to the increasing unrest in countries around the world, the U.S., will likely continue to receive an inflow of refugees fleeing dangerous situations in their home countries. As I previously stated the socio-economic and political crisis in Venezuela has prompted a massive exodus. Being a recent phenomenon, it is understudied. Thus, this dissertation will contribute to understanding the career trajectories of Venezuelan refugee professionals, how they overcome challenges and take advantages of opportunities.

It is in the best interest of the United States refugee and asylum seeker professionals can be productive individuals, who can work in their fields of expertise, generate more income,

contribute to the U.S. economy in the shortest time possible, as opposed to working in low-paying survival jobs for an extended period due to a lack of credential recognition. A greater understanding of the resettlement and integration processes can also benefit immigration policies to effectively address refugee professionals' assimilation needs.

Future Venezuelan refugee professionals may also benefit by understanding the career challenges, choices, and opportunities they are likely to encounter. Furthermore, preparing to manage their career paths, may be helpful in decreasing the stress associated with acculturation.

In the Human Resource Development (HRD) field, this study will contribute in terms of career development and career adaptability of Venezuelan refugee professionals in South Florida. Of the three domains of HRD, training and development (T&D), organizational development (OD) and career development (CD), career development is the least explored domain overall (Swanson & Holton, 2009), and particularly in relation to refugees.

Richardson et al. (2018) argue the academic community in general and career management scholars in particular, have remained quiet about the implications and ramifications of the global refugee crisis. Only a few studies of studies have addressed the implications not only for business, but also for career systems and for individual career trajectories. Such gaps represent a golden opportunity to educate the community, federal and state refugee agencies and potential employers of refugees.

Career development is one of the three domains of HRD and it is defined as the lifelong method of managing one's intellectual resources through learning and work, and inevitably influenced by both personal experience and context (Swanson & Holton, 2009). Nyabvudzi and Chinyamurindi (2020) support this definition because it recognizes different variables such as social, sociological, economic, and educational factors which all contribute to career

development. These variables have the potential to help or hinder refugees' career advancement. Human capital accumulation, growth, and development are at the heart of HRD's career development domain. Its primary goal being to improve skills, with a particular emphasis on education and capacity building.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation study was to explore the barriers and facilitators Venezuelan refugee professionals encounter in South Florida to work and resume their careers in the professions for which they trained.

Research Study Questions

1. What are the career experiences of Venezuelan refugee professionals after resettlement in South Florida, United States?
2. How do home country education, work experience and social capital influence Venezuelan refugee professionals' ability to resume their careers and work in their professions?

The Boundaries of the Study

This dissertation will address the career experiences of Venezuelan refugee professionals in South Florida, as the region in the U.S., with the largest Venezuelan refugee and immigrant population. It is therefore bounded to this region and not generalizable to other regions or states. It is also applicable only to Venezuelan refugee professionals and not to Venezuelan immigrants or citizens of other nationalities.

Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study and for clarity, I provide the following definitions of the terminology I used throughout this dissertation.

Case Study: It refers to a method of investigating a particular topic which portrays the various perspectives of people involved in the subject under study and display enough evidence to support the major findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Career Path or Trajectory: “The combination and evolving sequence of roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime” (Super, 1980, p. 282).

Experience: “It’s the lifeworld. The state of affairs in which the world is lived, felt, undergone and made sense of - that is the object of study of the human and social sciences” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 84)

Formal Job or Sector: “When an organization hires an employee through an established working agreement which includes, salary or wages, health benefits, and defined work hours and workdays. Formal jobs are recognized as income sources on which income taxes must be paid” (Quain, 2019, para. 2).

Human Capital: “Education and training are the most important investment in human capital. Expenditures on education, training and medical care are investments which do not produce financial and physical assets; they produce human capital because one cannot separate a person from his/her knowledge, skills or health” (Becker, 1964, pp. 16-17).

Social Capital: Refers to “features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1993, p. 35). According to social capital theory, social contacts provide access to resources that can be helpful in attaining other forms of capital. A key aspect of the resources available through one’s network is the information people can provide on the labor market (Portes, 2000).

Refugees: The difference among the terms; refugees, asylees and exiles is mainly procedural. Exiles and asylees apply for asylum once they arrive in the country, not through the

United Nations or embassy. Once their asylum petition is approved, they become refugees. In the context of this study the term refugee will be used to refer to Venezuelan citizens who have been a) forced to leave their homeland, b) who are in need of international protection c) who have applied for asylum and have a work permit in the U.S., regardless of place or time of formal petition.

List of abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOJ	Department of Justice
DOS	Department of State
EO	Executive Order
FDCF	Florida Department of Children and Families
HCT	Human Capital Theory
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
HRW	Human Rights Watch
MPI	Migration Policy Institute
ORR	Office of Refugee Resettlement
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
R&P	Reception and Placement
SCT	Social Capital Theory
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USRAP	United States Refugee Admission Program
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Service

WF Wilson Fish Model

Theoretical Frameworks

I based my study on two theories. First, Human Capital Theory (HCT) which asserts schooling raises earning potential and productivity. It is essentially based on the premise that "education and training are the most important investments in human capital" (Becker, 1964, p.19). Second, Social Capital Theory (SCT) developed by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993) posits the importance of social organizations such as social networks and relationships, religious and ethnic groups based on trust, cooperation and collaboration for mutual benefit and economic well-being.

Human Capital Theory

Swanson and Holton (2009) refer to HRD as one a young academic discipline in the social sciences, and as such it is imperative to continue to expand its theory base. One of the fields central to building and expanding the theory base is economics. Within the science of economics, human capital theory is considered the branch most applicable to HRD.

The constant flow of immigrants and refugees from all over the world to the U.S., and all the implications for the economy continues to be a topic of concern for policy makers and a subject of study in academia. Understanding how the relationship between human capital investment and earnings impact refugee professional careers once they have settled in the U.S., is of paramount importance (Hashmi, 1987).

Becker (1964) first developed the human capital theory to explain the contribution and role of human resources on economic growth. He studied the relationships between earnings, return and investment. One of the most important contributions of human capital theory from the perspective of migration is the development of the function of human capital earnings. Through

an analysis of earning patterns of different immigrant and refugees groups and their economic progress, it is possible to understand how the labor market adjusts in this context.

The most determining factors of immigrants and refugees' economic adaptation to the host country are human capital, household composition and production, certain acculturation indicators, language ability and gender. Still human capital is the singled out as the most important one, on which all others depend (Becker, 1964; Potocky-Tripodi, 2004).

Employment status, earning and welfare utilization are the most widely used indicators to evaluate refugees' adaptation. In simple terms, human capital considers education, skills and experience in the origin and host countries as the characteristics which can enhance people's economic well-being. "Extensive research on immigrants and refugees has clearly demonstrated that the greater these human capital resources, the greater is their economic well-being" (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004, p. 60). Concerns about identifying and understanding the factors that have an impact and affect the economic adaptation of refugees continues to generate a substantial amount of scholarship.

In contrast, Marginson (2019) argues the time and context when Becker wrote and published his Human Capital were quite different. She contends human capital theory lacks the realism of today. In countries with fluctuating economies where a large percentage of youth is in higher education, not all graduates enter professional jobs, and income inequality in the U.S., has increased. She further claims the context has changed so dramatically that nowadays "inheritance is more potent and income from capital now outweighs income from labor as a source of wealth" (p. 288). In addressing a critical stance on human capital theory, Marginson (2019) posits that Becker overlooked the importance of family income, social and cultural capital for access to higher education and better employment. Furthermore, research suggests graduates from lower

or higher income families determine lower or higher earnings (Glomm & Ravikumar, 1992; Delaney et al., 2011; Britton et al., 2016). If this inequality of opportunities exists then, refugees are at a greater disadvantage in terms of human capital, regardless of how much of it they have accumulated in their origin country. Perhaps cultural, financial, and social capital can help, especially in the case of middle and upper-class Venezuelans who were targeted and persecuted by the socialist regime and ultimately forced to flee.

Social Capital Theory

The term social capital has been used for over a century. It dates back to 1916 when Hanifan defined it as assets people encounter, experience, give and have in their daily lives, which include cooperation, recognition, social relationships, trust and fellowship among others (Keeley, 2007).

Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993) lead the development of social capital theory and even though they did not apply it to the refugee populations, their concepts have been widely accepted to explain some of the variables involving refugees and immigrants. Coleman (1988) posits that two schools of thought attempt to define, describe, and explain social action from their own field perspectives. On one side sociologists explain the how the social context influences the individual actor, who follows the established rules and obligations of his social network or group. On the other hand, economists view the individual actor as independent, goal-oriented and only focused on maximizing productivity. It is the philosophies of these two schools of thought that lead to the merger both streams and formulate social capital theory.

Social capital has wide acceptance as an explanatory aspect for economic development. Potocky-Tripodi (2004) asserts “it is often conceived as the foundation of prosperity and poverty because economic transactions are ingrained in social relations” (p. 62). These social relations

make economic transactions easier and at the same time provide access to information that can be productive and beneficial for all parties.

No agreement exists on a single definition of social capital. About three categories have some consensus among scholars as forms of social capital. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) groups these three categories in bonds, bridges and linkages. Bonds are the groups that have a shared identity and/or ethnicity. Friends, coworkers, and colleagues are examples of bridges, or relationships that do not have a shared identity. Connections to other groups, communities or persons at various levels of the social structure are linkages (Keely, 2007).

While social bonds can help refugees in their integration process, they can also be counterproductive. When these groups are tightly knit, it can prevent them from creating bridges and linkages in mainstream society, thus marginalizing themselves further (Keely, 2007).

Organization of the Dissertation Chapters

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. In chapter I, I introduce the topic, identify the problem, research questions, describe the significance of the study, and present the theoretical frameworks. In chapter II, I explain the context of the study and reviews extant literature applicable to the research topic, including the influence of the Venezuela's exodus on U.S. immigration, Venezuela demographics and migration history to understand the present context. Current U.S. refugee landscape, U.S. federal and state legislation approach to refugees and the two theories that informed this study: Becker's (1964), Schultz's (1961), Mincer & Ofek's (1982), Nelson & Phelps (1966), Lucas' (1988) human capital theory, Bourdieu's (1986), Coleman's (1988) and Putnam's (1993) social capital theory. In chapter III, I describe the research methodology I used for the study, including the research design, researcher's

positionality, participants' selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures. In chapter IV, I present the participants' stories, report the findings, and answers to the study research questions. In chapter V, I discuss the significant findings, implications for HRD, offer recommendations for refugees' foreign credential evaluation and/or recognition; a key marker of refugee professionals' integration into the U.S. society. I also suggest future research directions and draw a final conclusion.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent history has witnessed the highest levels of worldwide rates of migration. The United Nations (2019) estimates that over 250 million people have settled in other countries than their own. Almost every country is either a receptor or a sender of emigrants to other nations. Immigrants and refugees move for various reasons, some economic, some social, some escaping violence and religious or political persecution and some displaced involuntarily either by conflict or natural disasters.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2019) reported that by June of 2019 there were a striking 25.4 million refugees. A total of 16% of those refugees relocated and settled in the United States.

The resettlement policy of the United States Refugee Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-212) created to provide comprehensive and uniform provisions for the effective resettlement of refugees clearly posits the economic adaptability of refugees is its paramount goal. By the same token, the UNHCR (1997) notes one of the most important indicators of successful refugee resettlement is employment.

Furthermore, Colby & Ortman (2017) for the U.S. Census Bureau report the workforce diversity is increasing at an unprecedented fast rate. The U.S. Labor Bureau of Statistics (2019) projects by 2028, the Hispanic share of the labor force will increase more than any other race or ethnic group. “Venezuelans are now the 13th-largest population of Hispanic origin living in the U.S. Since 2000, the Venezuelan-origin population has increased 352%, growing from 93,000 to 421,000 over the period” (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2019, para 2). Thus, gaining an insight on how Venezuelan refugee professionals assimilate into the U.S. workforce can be advantageous.

Study Context

The study was conducted with Venezuelan refugee professionals who reside in the state of Florida, United States. In this section, I will provide an overview of Venezuela, its economy, demographics, and the background of the current crisis and the circumstances from which the participants arrived in the U.S., followed by their current context in the United States.

Venezuela's Country Overview

Venezuela is located in northern South America, with the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean to the north, Guyana to the east, Brazil to the south, and Colombia to the west.

During the 1970s, several countries in South America were under dictatorial regimes including Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay. In contrast, Venezuela was one of the few stable and democratic nations in the region. Venezuela had a rapidly growing economy, a strong currency and social peace; which attracted many people from other latitudes to choose it as their place of residence. Similarly, European citizens from Spain, Italy and Portugal continued to arrive to reunite with family and friends who had already resettled in the country after World War II.

Economy

In the early 1960s, Venezuela was a rich nation, it produced more than 10 % of the world's crude and had a per capita GDP several times greater than Brazil and Colombia, and not far behind the United States.

The most economically significant natural resources of Venezuela are petroleum and natural gas, which account for about one-fifth of the gross domestic product (GDP). Venezuela is well known for having one of the largest proven petroleum reserves in the world. Multinational firms were responsible for more than four-fifths of the overall production. Once the government

nationalized the industry, the state-owned company, Petróleos de Venezuela, SA (PDVSA), assumed responsibility for production, but it was heavily dependent on the advanced technology of foreign oil companies to refine, transport, and market oil and natural gas (Kiger, 2019).

In the late 1980s and early1990s, when the government encountered economic challenges, it implemented policies such as reopening the petroleum industry to foreign investment. The goal was to update refineries, facilitate production through joint ventures, and exploit and expand heavy crude oil reserves. Heavy crude oil is a highly valuable energy resource requiring not only considerable effort but a very high level of technical expertise and experience to be able to produce and process it (Vazquez, 2012).

In a reversal of this trend, when socialist Hugo Chávez was elected president for two consecutive 6-year terms, he put all his efforts in nationalizing the industry, his goal was to take full control of the oil sector. He seized the operations of all foreign oil firms in the country in 2007.

Demographics

Venezuela's population projection for January 2020 was estimated at 31,133,609 but, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) forecast the exodus of Venezuelans could reach over 6 million according to data from governments receiving Venezuelans, and would be among the world's biggest recent displacement crises (UNHCR, n.d.). It is important to note that the only way to obtain figures is through governments in host countries, as the government of Venezuela has stopped reporting migration numbers. The initial projected number was 7 million by the end of 2020, but the Covid-19 pandemic has, to some extent, limited the migration flow.

Venezuela is considered a young country. Information is included by sex and age group

as follows: 0-14 years (children), 15-24 years (early working age), 25-54 years (prime working age), 55-64 years (mature working age), 65 years and over (elderly). The age structure of a population affects a nation's key socioeconomic issues. For example, the age structure can help predict potential political issues, such as the rapid growth of a young adult population unable to find employment, having to work in the informal sector, and facing rampant violence can lead to civil unrest and protests and ultimately to the exodus. Fertility, mortality, international migration trends, and displacement change the pyramid shape over time. Figure 1 displays the population breakdown by age (Central Intelligence Agency Venezuela, 2020).

0-14 years: 25.66% (male 3,759,280/female 3,591,897)

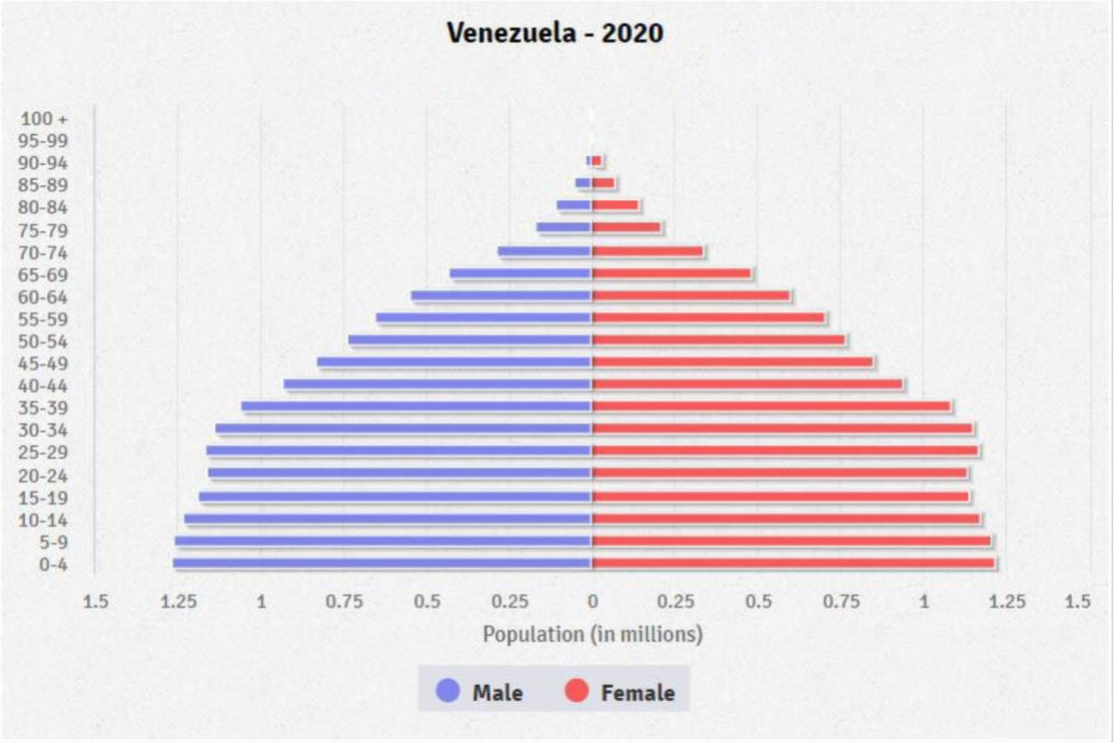
15-24 years: 16.14% (male 2,348,073/female 2,275,912)

25-54 years: 41.26% (male 5,869,736/female 5,949,082)

55-64 years: 8.76% (male 1,203,430/female 1,305,285)

65 years and over: 8.18% (male 1,069,262/female 1,272,646) (2020 est.)

Figure 1. Venezuela - Population Pyramid



Data are from "The World Factbook Venezuela," by the Central Intelligence Agency, 2021 (https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/venezuela/) In the public domain.

The Venezuelan Exodus influence on U.S. Immigration Numbers

At a glance, the last few years of asylum petition data in the U.S., make it evident the extent of the impact of the Venezuelan exodus. According to USCIS (2019) from 2007 until 2016 China held the number one spot, with one-third of all new asylum applications each year. However, in 2017 and 2018, China's rank fell to 2nd and 4th place, respectively. Venezuelan nationals submitted more asylum applications in each of those two years than citizens of any other country, accounting for one-fifth of all applications filed in 2017 and more than one-quarter of the total in 2018. For the past 5 years, nationals of Venezuela have been among the top

5 nationalities submitting asylum applications in the United States.

Table 1. Top 5 Nationalities with Asylum Applications

USCIS Fiscal Year October 2018 to September 2019

Country	Applications Received	Percentage	Rank
Venezuela	24,531	29%	1
China	9,737	12%	2
Guatemala	9,620	12%	3
El Salvador	5,960	7%	4
Honduras	5,548	7%	5

Data are from "Refugees and Asylees: 2019," by R. Baugh, 2020, United States Department of Homeland Security. Annual Flow Report. (https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2019/refugee_and_asylee_2019.pdf). In the public domain.

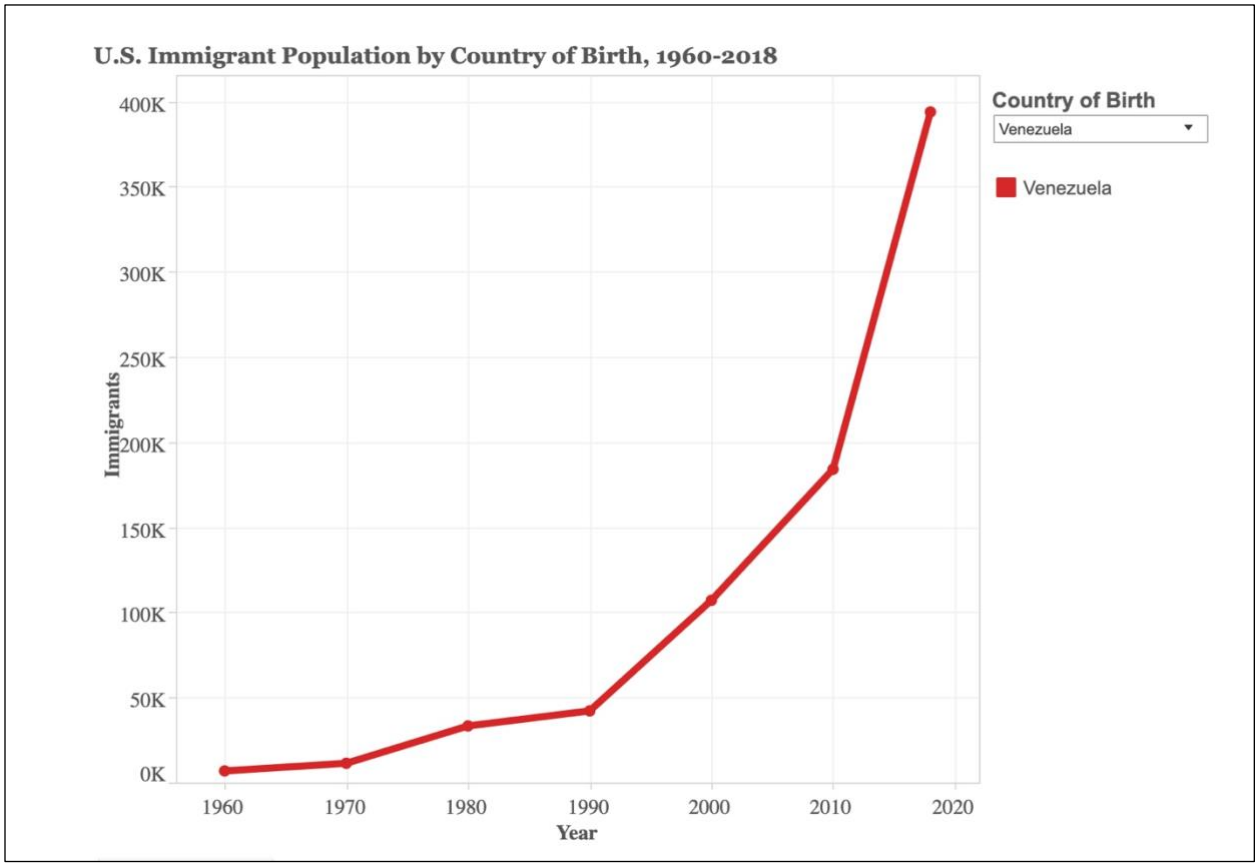
To put the Venezuelan context in perspective, much of the economic, social and political crisis was a direct consequence of Hugo Chavez's socialism of the 21st-century model, which he imposed after taking office in 1999. He promised to diminish the influence of the elite and distribute some of the extraordinary income the country received from high oil prices to social programs for the poor. Nevertheless, rampant mismanagement and corruption plagued these programs and did very little to improve the situation.

After Chávez passed away in 2013, his successor, Nicolás Maduro, has continued to implement socialist policies even after oil prices fell, national oil production decreased to record-low levels, and overall living conditions seriously deteriorated, becoming a decisive push factor for the massive exodus.

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) reported the trends of all the immigrant population from Venezuela between 1960 and 2019. The was a clear slow upward trend in the early years

between 1960 and 1980, a steady upward trend in the 1990s as a result of Hugo Chavez being elected president as seen in Figure 2. A considerable upward spike began in 2010 and continued when Nicolas Maduro was elected president until the present (MPI, 2020).

Figure 2. Venezuela Immigration to the U.S. 1960-2019



From "Countries of birth for U.S. immigrants, 1960-Present." Migration Policy Institute, 2020 (https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/immigrants-countries-birth-over-time). Reprinted with permission.

Refugee Professionals in the U.S.

Among the many refugees who resettle in the U.S., there are thousands who are professionals with successful careers, yet this pool of " highly-skilled professionals may never

return to their trained professions or find work that pays more than minimum wage" (Campbell, 2018, p. 139).

Campbell (2018) argues refugee professionals who have the determination to continue and advance their careers in the host country, will in most cases, find themselves in minimum wage jobs and face numerous obstacles in being able to practice their careers, mainly due to lack of foreign credential recognition.

Previous studies contend the successful entrance of refugees in the labor market is paramount for the assimilation process. It contributes to the creation of social networks in the community and a general sense of well-being. Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2007) state, "employment is an important pathway to social inclusion of refugees. ... In fact, employment has been identified as the single most important aspect of migrant resettlement" (p. 108).

Several studies assert refugees experience a decline in occupational status, with adverse consequences on their adaptation process often preventing them from establishing social networks and mixing with the mainstream society. Feelings of social isolation affect a person's sense of well-being and overall life satisfaction, two important indicators of social inclusion. As a result, employment below the skills of refugees also means "a loss of human capital for the host country." (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007, p. 109).

To gain a more solid understanding of the situation of refugees, in the next section I briefly explore the Department of State legislation and policy applicable to all refugees upon arrival.

Refugee Legislation in the United States

Per the United States Constitution, the federal government is the exclusive authority over all matters concerning immigration. For more than 50 years, as a signatory nation of international

treaties, the United States has been under obligations concerning refugees' admission. For instance, if a person arrives on U.S., grounds and claims asylum, the U.S., has to process their claim under the international law of resettlement (Campbell, 2018).

On the basis of the requirement to comply with the objective and purpose of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the U.S., must fulfill its legal obligations in good faith. Furthermore, it is obliged to do so in accordance with its own domestic law, which additionally stipulates the right to move freely in the country and choose where to resettle (Campbell, 2018).

According to De Peña (2017) to oversee and regulate the admission and resettlement of refugees the U.S. congress has enacted a number of humanitarian laws including the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and the Refugee Act of 1980. Many of these laws reaffirm and reiterate the power of the federal government. Bruno (2017) asserts these laws have a direct impact on the following: to control immigration; accept refugees; increase or decrease the number of refugees accepted for humanitarian purposes; allow programs for domestic resettlement and refugee assistance; provide the necessary funding to states and private and public organizations who assist in the refugees' resettlement process.

Federal Control over Refugee Matters

The Department of State (DOS) in cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) manage the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Through the Reception and Placement Program (R&P) approves petitions and determines where refugees will initially resettle (ORR, 2018). The R&P program takes into account biographical and other details about incoming refugees in the decision-making process.

Consistent with the importance of the social capital factor in refugee resettlement, one

consideration in this process is when refugees have personal connections in the U.S., the agency makes an effort to resettle them within 50 to 100 miles distance.

State Level Approach to Refugee Resettlement

States have the freedom to select one among three federally funded models of assistance delivery to refugees. I describe these assistance models below:

1. Public-private partnership (PPP)

States can opt to partner via a contract or a grant with local resettlement, voluntary agencies to administer the Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) program. States that choose this option usually base this decision on the premise that these agencies are better equipped to deliver optimal services based on real needs than state agencies. The goal is to combine and integrate the RCA program with local refugee resettlement services, case management and incentives for employment and self-sufficiency in the shortest time possible. The Public/Private Partnership aims to improve the quality and efficiency of the refugee resettlement program by establishing a connection between the initial refugees' admission and refugees' services available (ORR, 2019).

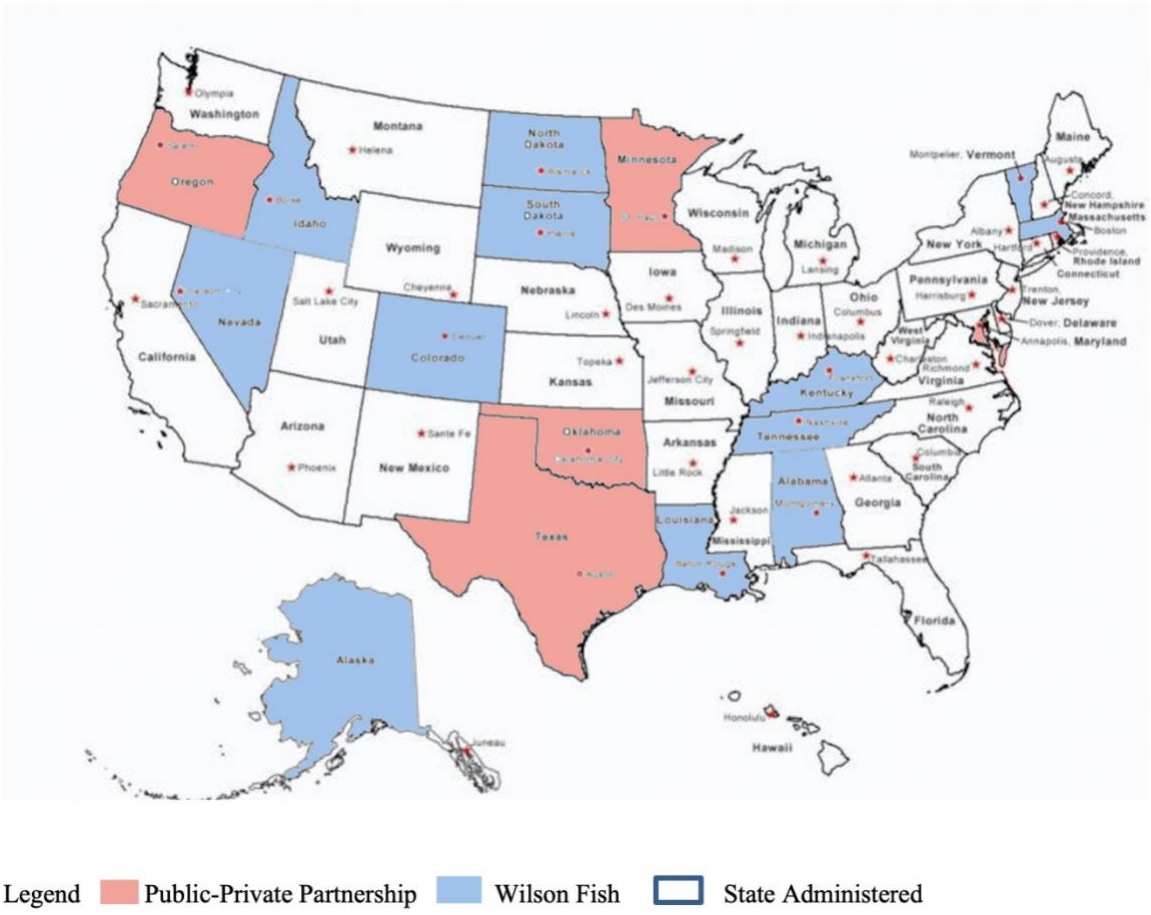
2. Wilson Fish (WF)

The Wilson Fish is an alternative to traditional state-administered refugee resettlement programs for providing cash assistance and support services to eligible populations. In this model, States could subcontract service providers for all the aspects of the refugee program or states could also opt to transfer the management of services to agencies. One of the distinctive features of the WF program is that states provide refugees all of the resettlement help they need through a centralized agency (De Peña, 2017).

3. State administered

In this model, States administer and manage all the stages of the Refugee Resettlement Program (RRP), Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Refugee Health Assistance (RHA). The federal government reimburses states for all expenses incurred in the programs (ORR, 2019). Figure 3 and Table 2 below display the current models each state has adopted. Florida is under the state administered model.

Figure 3. U.S. Map of Refugee Program Administration by State



From "Find resources and contacts in your state," by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d. Administration for Children and Families. (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/map/find-resources-and-contacts-your-state). In the public domain.

Table 2. Refugee Program Administration per State

Public Private Partnership	Wilson Fish Program	State Administered
Maryland	Alaska	Arizona
Minnesota	Alabama	Arkansas
Oklahoma	Colorado	California
Oregon	Idaho	Connecticut
Texas	Kentucky	Delaware
	Louisiana	District of Columbia
	Massachusetts	**Florida**
	Nevada	Georgia
	Rhode Island	Hawaii
	South Dakota	Illinois
	San Diego County (CA)	Indiana
	Vermont	Iowa
		Kansas
		Maine
		Michigan
		Mississippi
		Missouri
		Montana
		Nebraska
		New Hampshire
		New Jersey
		New Mexico
		New York
		North Carolina
		Ohio
		Pennsylvania
		South Carolina
		Utah
		Washington
		Virginia
		West Virginia
		Wisconsin

Adapted from "Find resources and contacts in your state," by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d. Administration for Children and Families. (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/map/find-resources-and-contacts-your-state). In the public domain.

Presently, the majority of the states operate in the state administered model including Florida, whose refugee program is the largest in the nation, receiving more than 27,000 refugees, asylees, and Cuban/Haitian entrants each year. (Florida Department of Children and Families, n.d.). Madrid (2020) explains the number of refugees and asylees was set at 70,000 in 2014. Then in 2017, the U.S. resettled 53,716 refugees, the lowest number in the country since the years following the September 11th terrorist attacks, and a steep decline from 2016, when it resettled about 84,994. The decreasing ceiling trend continued to 45,000, then 30,000, in the 2020 fiscal year the number set was 18,000, and in 2021 down to 15,000, the lowest number on record.

In addition to the low admission ceiling for refugees, on September 26, 2019, president Donald J. Trump issued an executive order (EO), requiring "states and local governments provide written consent authorizing the initial resettlement of refugees into their respective communities" (ORR, 2019, para 1). The responsibility for establishing a process to obtain consent from state governments fell on the Department of State (DOS) and the Health and Human Services (HHS) departments. The EO has the objective to allow states to make their decisions based on whether they were equipped to provide the services that would speed refugees' integrations and most importantly foster economic self-sufficiency (ORR, 2019). This is the first shift for a federally funded program, giving more responsibilities and decision power to the states to resettle refugees in their communities.

While there is no denying this drastic decrease in the refugee admission ceiling comes at the worst time, because of the increasing number of refugees and displaced persons worldwide, it is also a fact that USCIS processing times are slow and the case backlog keeps on growing (Johnson, 2020). A probable explanation for setting such a low ceiling may be that the current

burden on the U.S. immigration system must be eased before a large number of refugees can be resettled again and asylum petitions can be processed in months instead of years.

According to Johnson (2020) the USCIS backlog situation has become so out of hand that in a bipartisan effort and putting politics aside, Congressman Tony Cárdenas (D-CA) and Congressman Steve Stivers (R-OH) introduced the bipartisan Case Backlog and Transparency Act of 2020 to address the severe case backlog at USCIS. This bill establishes new reporting requirements for USCIS and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to examine the reason of processing delays and offer potential solutions to reduce the backlog of immigration cases. It is well known how these delays impact vulnerable individuals, entire families, employers, and businesses. The backlog increased from 544,000 to over 2.4 million in 4 years from 2014 to 2018.

As per USCIS (2020) as a result of the transfer of immigration functions from the Department of Justice (DOJ), Immigration and Naturalization Service to the Department of Homeland Security, the Secretary of Homeland Security must submit an annual report to congress on the impact of the transfer on immigration services, including addressing the backlog and a detailed plan to solve it. For the fiscal year 2019, the Secretary of Homeland Security reported the main reasons for the backlog are the following:

- An increase in petitions and applications after the 2016 presidential election. From a ceiling of 70,000 to 85,000.
- An 21% increase in application fees.
- Stricter security checks.
- Overall increased complexity of forms and policies impacting per hour completion.
- Understaff DHS facilities.

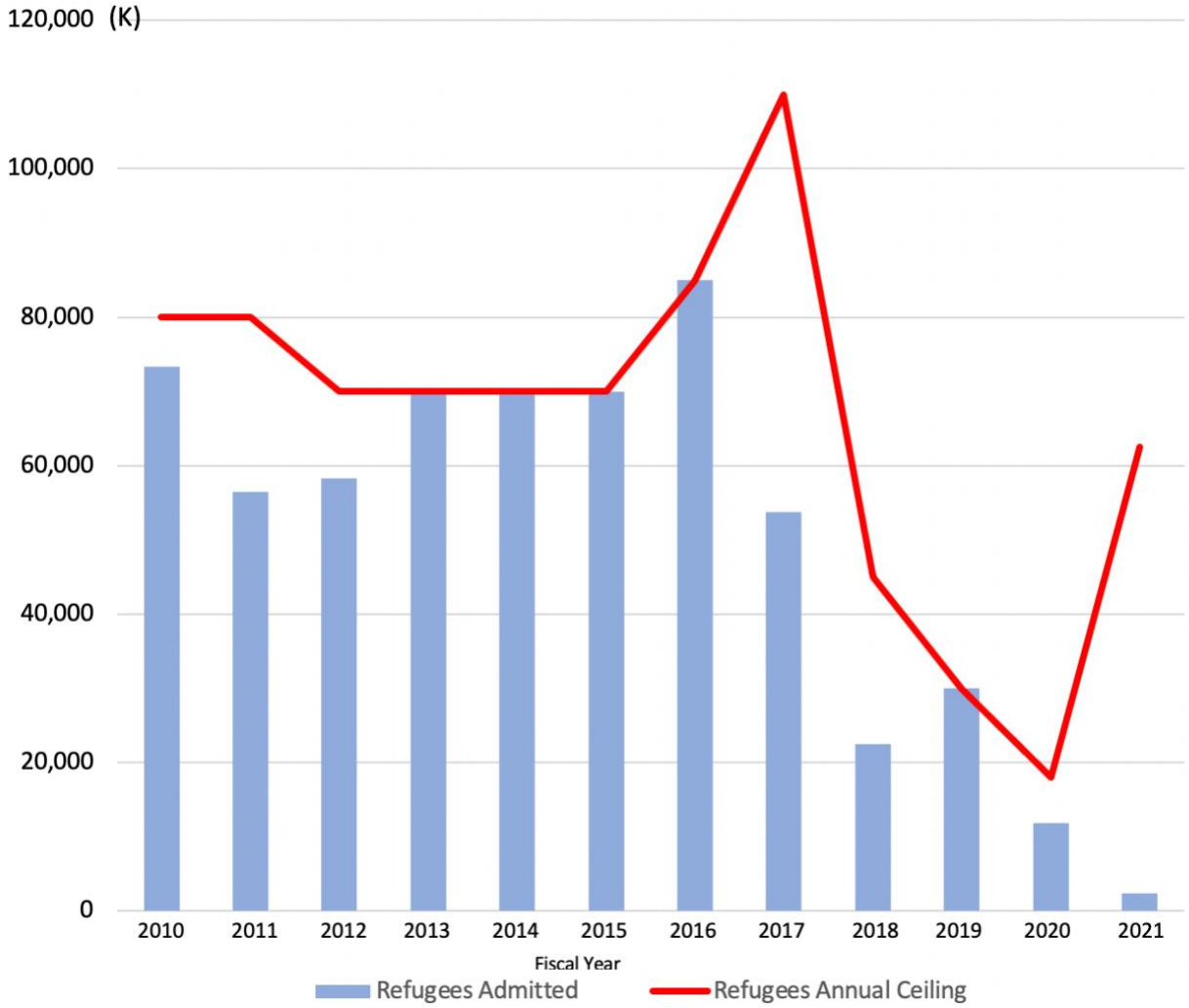
To solve these issues, USCIS has provided a list of possible but mid-term solutions to improve productivity and reduce the 2.5 million backlogs.

- Place expert adjudicators in more complex cases.
- Modernize and upgrade the contact centers and online self-help features.
- Implement employees performance metrics as part of their evaluations.
- Expand electronic and automation processes.
- Hiring and training more staff.

These issues can have devastating consequences for asylum seekers, because a new rule came into effect on August 25th 2020, increasing the waiting period for asylum seekers to be able to apply for an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card from 150 to 365 calendar days, based on a pending asylum application. This is one of the main reasons why asylum seekers end up working without a job permit and sometimes fall victims of exploitation. To add insult to injury, while their asylum petition is pending, which can take years, asylum seekers cannot receive any state or federal benefits.

On May 3, 2021 President Joe Biden after a revision of the immigration landscape, reversed the annual refugee admissions set at a 15,000 cap to 62,500 for the current fiscal year as seen in Figure 4. According to the President, this would " erase the historically low number set by the previous administration of 15,000, which did not reflect America's values as a nation that welcomes and supports refugees" (U.S. Government, 2021, para 1) .

Figure 4. U.S. Refugee Ceilings and Admissions from 2010 to 2021



Data are adapted from "Admissions & Arrivals," by the United States Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. Refugee Processing Center, April 30, 2021 (https://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/). In the public domain.

The next section is an exploration of the factors affecting refugees' search for employment in their professions, migrant policies that affect the settlement and assimilation processes in the United States.

The Human Capital of Refugee Professionals

Education improves income and productivity, according to Becker's (1964) groundbreaking work on human capital. He also posits that an opposing view, however, denies that schooling does much to improve productivity, and instead "it stresses credentialism in other words, the belief that degrees and education convey information about the underlying abilities, persistence, and other valuable traits of people." (Becker, 1964 p. 19)

Becker (1964) argues credentialism does not influence the positive association between schooling and earning power. This argument holds true when education and degrees are pursued in the host country, but not for degrees obtained in the origin country, putting refugee professionals in a serious disadvantage.

Chiswick and Miller (1994) posit that prior research into immigrant labor performance generally confirms that economic adjustment and assimilation depends on the investment immigrants and refugees make on the skills specific to the host country. Beginning with learning the language, additional investments in schooling and job training after arrival enhances the knowledge acquired in their home countries.

When improvement of economic conditions is the first motivating factor, immigrants are likely to have a transferable set of skills. In contrast, refugees would include a large number of people with low or non-transferable skills (Khan, 1997). This is a generalization that may not hold true for all refugee cohorts in the U.S.

Khan (1997) addressed post-immigration schooling investments, and conducted an extensive study on human capital investment of immigrants in the U.S., based on the relationships between earnings, return and investment and human capital theory. Her study focused on post-migration investment in education among adult immigrants and refugees in the

U.S. She noted one important way for new immigrants to overcome the non-recognition of their qualifications and to compete is to invest in their skills in the host country.

Mincer & Ofek (1982) conducted research on human capital depreciation when careers are put on hold either in a planned or unplanned manner. In the immigration context, transferability of skills and knowledge is limited for refugees and may result in partial or substantial loss of human capital. When the difference between the country of origin and the host country is considerable, the human capital depreciation is greater. The study also concluded that as expected, the difference of downward mobility or depreciation is greater for immigrants and refugees from non-English speaking countries.

Basilio et al. (2017) researched the transferability of refugees' human capital from home country to the host society and the wage differential between natives and migrants. Their conclusion was that "human capital obtained from the origin country may not be equivalent to human capital obtained in the host country due to limited transferability of skills and imperfect compatibility of home and host country labor markets." (p. 260). The term imperfect compatibility refers to education and labor market experience in foreign countries far from being the perfect substitute in receiving countries. In other words, skills that are desirable in one labor market may not increase competitiveness or productivity in another, and hence may not be compensated equally. When credentials are not recognized, even if refugees have the skills needed in the receiving country, they will still earn lower wages.

Critics of the U.S. refugee resettlement program argue that the problem stems from a lack of understanding of what a robust integration program entail, including the level of their professional qualifications. Furthermore, the psycho-social, linguistic, and cultural integration factors are often overlooked or completely ignored. Language barriers can limit opportunities for

employment and hinder refugees ' ability to operate and communicate in complex systems (Brown & Scribner, 2014). In the following section I will cover the foreign professional certification or credential recognition and the current U.S., laws that regulate the credentialing or the re-credentialing process of refugee professionals.

Refugees, Professional Certifications, and U.S. Regulations

Article 19 of the 1951 Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, of which the United States is a party, specifically clearly states the following:

> Each Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory who hold diplomas recognized by the competent authorities of that State, and who are desirous of practicing a liberal profession, treatment as favourable as possible and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances" (UN, 1951, p. 23).

In other words, the United States and all state parties that ratified their adhesion to the convention and/or protocol must respect and support refugees' right to practice liberal professions.

The decentralization of the federal system means that no single entity in charge of professional certification exists for liberal professions in the U.S., (Rabben, 2013). The 1951 Convention and Protocol for Refugees provides a definition of liberal professions and they may have different meanings in different countries. They include "lawyers, doctors, dentists, veterinarians, engineers and architects working on their own account. It may also include pharmacists, artists and accountants. The term *liberal* means that the persons must possess certain qualifications or a special license. The word 'diploma' includes any degree or certificate required to exercise a particular profession." (UNHCR, n.d., p. 113).

Campbell (2018) asserts that the U. S. does not comply with Article 19. This is the result of the absence of consistent federal laws and policies. To complicate matters further, each state has different refugee laws making it difficult for them to navigate the system. The funding deficit of the federal refugee resettlement program is the reason for the low-quality jobs. The goal is for refugees to obtain any type of employment as quickly as possible. Thus, it is not surprising to meet a UPS driver who is an engineer, or an Uber driver who is a dentist.

The considerable amount of conflicting, often contradictory, regional, state, and national laws, processes, and exams makes navigating the process of recertification in the United States difficult, time-consuming, and costly. Additionally, since each state has its own regulations, processes and fees, unfortunately, professional license granted by one state are not transferable to others (Rabben, 2013).

When timely return to the profession is not possible, refugees may have other options. One is career laddering, in this process refugee professionals can work in an entry level or lower-level job with the goal of training and gaining experience, and then be able to move up the ladder in their fields (Loo, 2016).

Venezuelan Refugee Professionals

The deterioration of democratic institutions, insecurity, failing oil prices, food and medicine scarcity and two decades of mismanagement has resulted in record numbers of Venezuelans fleeing the country for survival and after giving up hope the domestic situation will improve anytime soon (Páez, 2015).

The increasing Venezuelan migration is deserving of international attention because there is no record in this country of a migratory phenomenon of this magnitude, or of a population displacement at such a large scale from a country that is not at war. Its impact on the South

American region and on countries that are geographically farther away, like the United States and Spain continue to escalate.

Due to the recency of this phenomenon, there is no extensive research on the subject. As De la Vega and Vargas (2014) indicate "the incipient specialized literature on migration in Venezuela is recent, because that issue was not considered a problem of importance for that society" (p. 68).

The socio-economic and political crisis in Venezuela has forced millions of its citizens to seek a new life in other countries. Contrary to the dynamic and history, Venezuela was a nation used to receiving immigrants from many parts of the world, who perceived it as a land of opportunities and new beginnings. Today, the country is experiencing an unprecedented exodus, the five top Venezuelan refugee receptor countries are Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile and the United States (Wolfe, 2021).

Gallardo & Batalova (2020) from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), reported that in terms of education, age and employment, "fifty-four percent of immigrants from Venezuela were college graduates. Forty-two percent were in management, business, science and arts occupation, probably related to their higher level of education and better English language skills" (p. 5).

The situation is different for the majority of asylum seekers who come from different circumstances than economic immigrants. First of all, they have to prove to the authorities that they fulfill the legal description of a refugee. Since they have not been declared a refugee by the UNHCR, they do not obtain loans to fund their journeys to the United States. Second, since asylees are often unable to travel with their entire family , family reunification can take time to accomplish.

As opposed to sponsored refugees, asylum seekers are not entitled to any public assistance or benefits. They are also compelled to rely on others for free or low-cost housing, which can lead to unsustainable and even violent living situations. Some asylum seekers come with nowhere to go; others are jailed in immigration detention centers; and others are free to go only after or if their asylum claims are processed and approved. (Harris, 2016).

This is where many Venezuelan asylum seeker professionals differ from the majority of asylum seekers from other countries. To begin with, all 12 participants arrived by air at Miami International Airport. They all submitted asylum petitions later, they all had a place to stay with relatives and friends while they explored what they needed to do, and who they needed to contact to start the asylum process, and even how to hire an immigration lawyer to represent them in court.

To date, only a limited number of studies identify the role class plays in migratory movements, especially those involving refugees and asylum seekers. Based on Bourdieu, Van Hear (2014a) argues that migration and, eventually, its outcome is influenced by the resources migrants possess and the ability to mobilize such resources is largely determined by the socio-economic context or class. There is a rank of countries to where refugees can escape, more secure and attractive destinations are accessible to more affluent refugees who count on social and financial resources (Van Hear, 2014b). This concept is applicable to the Venezuelan participants. To put this concept in context, a brief history of Venezuela's exchange control policies will provide a clearer picture of why and how the Venezuelan refugee professionals' case differs from others.

Venezuela's foreign exchange control policies overview

The foreign exchange market is the one that regulates the purchase and sale of these and

also allows a normal flow of foreign currency to exist, the exchange rate and the way in which they are sold is determined by the Central Bank of Venezuela together with the National Executive (Fletcher, 2004).

One of these modalities is foreign exchange control, which consists of intervention by the state in this market, restricting the supply and demand of foreign currency. By doing so, the state establishes a series of administrative rule and regulations affecting the transactions that give rise to the supply and demand for U.S. dollars (Fletcher, 2004).

In Venezuela, these measures have been applied since 1983 when the state recognized a huge deficit and was forced, in a certain way, to implement these controls. The implementation of such regulations gave way to one of the largest corruption cases in the economic history of the country.

The measures were supposed to be temporary, meant to stop capital flight and to bolster the local currency, the Bolivar. For many, currency devaluation is one of the first signs of the failing exchange controls. As a result, Venezuelans began to lose confidence in the government's ability to maintain a stable economy.

To safeguard the value of their earnings and savings, many middle-class Venezuelans used to travel abroad, to the U.S., and other countries in Europe, with another goal in mind, to open bank accounts in more solid currencies, and transfer their capital. They continued to do so every time they had a chance. It is also a well-documented fact that long before then, rich Venezuelans had already taken their fortunes out of the country. Ironically, what the government had tried so hard to avoid continued for years. Since 2003 president Chávez implemented stricter measures and controls amidst rampant inflation, making it harder, if not impossible, for newer generations of Venezuelans to save in local currency, let alone in U.S. dollars or euros. The

majority of the participants had savings in foreign currency or for the younger ones, their parents were able to help with the capital they themselves had saved in foreign currency in other countries.

Chapter II Summary

In this chapter I provided a review of the existing literature about the world refugee crisis and refugee professionals in the U.S. I zoomed in on Venezuela, to explain the context and background from which this particular refugee crisis originated. Next, I covered the impact the massive Venezuelan's exodus has had on the U.S., refugee numbers and a review of the Venezuelan immigration history upward trend numbers since the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998.

I explained the three state models of assistance to refugees; public-private partnership, Wilson Fish and State administered. States are free to adopt any of the three and Florida is under the state administered model.

The number of refugee admission in the U.S., has been declining over the last years. The U.S. presidency reduced the refugee admission ceiling to 15,000 in 2021 the lowest ever recorded and President Biden's review and reversal of this number to 62,500. Other important points discussed in this chapter have to do with the USCIS asylum applications backlog and the solutions proposed by the Secretary of Homeland Security including but not limited to the modernization of online and self-help features and overall automation of processes.

Human capital theory when applied to refugees suggests investing in education in the host country is critical when trying to overcome the non-recognition of foreign degrees and experience. Critics of the U.S., resettlement program argue it fails to address it holistically and integration becomes plagued with issues which hinder employment opportunities and career

advancement for refugees. I also pointed out how Venezuelan refugee professionals differ from the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in terms of mode of arrival and the resources they have to cover living expenses and immigration attorney's representation fees.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

How the Covid-19 Pandemic Impacted my Study

When I initially designed my study, and due to my limited travel funds at the time, I had planned to interview participants online. I had researched the literature about the advantages and disadvantages of this method of data collection and found the pros outweigh the cons. However, when I presented this proposal to my dissertation committee, I received feedback that I should conduct the fieldwork face-to-face. I obtained more funds and had a tentative interview schedule set up. I was ready to make travel arrangements to Florida when the Covid-19 pandemic changed it all.

Covid-19 has impacted research and the methods of data collection that involve human interaction, conferences and meetings, interviews, focus groups, and travel for data collection purposes. Until recently, it was common for qualitative researchers to travel to field sites and interview people to collect their data. The pandemic forced me to return to my initial proposal (Wigginton et al., 2020) .

After discussing it with my advisor, I started the Institutional Review Board (IRB) modification request and approval process to change my face-to-face data collection method to conducting interviews via video conference. It took longer than expected to obtain the final approval as the IRB office experienced a large number of requests for new applications and modifications. On April 16, 2020, my committee chair received a letter from the IRB office to notify my study fell under the exemption in accordance with the common rule 45 CFR 46.104 and was valid for three years. See Appendix D. Additionally, there was a notice alerting studies involving face-to-face interactions were not to begin or continue until the institution's human

research activities pause was lifted.

Consequently, I had to assess the affective environment of my recruited participants and what challenges or opportunities laid ahead. On one hand, the disruption of routines, fear, worries, uncertainty, illness, financial problems could result in some participants no longer willing or unable participate in my study. On the other hand, confinement and boredom could mean participants would welcome the opportunity to take part in my study. I had to be realistic, sensitive and open to all possibilities.

Once the IRB approved the modification request, I sent an email to each of the 8 participants who had voluntarily agreed to take part in my study to explain how I would conduct the interviews. Four expressed they were still willing to take part in the study. The remaining 4 were not, which I had anticipated, as they work in journalism and in the health sector. I devoted months to searching for more participants through my contacts and it paid off. I was able to get 8 more for a total of 12 participants.

Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research methodology, methods and procedures for my study, as well as my philosophical assumptions and why I chose a qualitative approach. The purpose of my study was to explore how Venezuelan refugee professionals in South Florida try to integrate in the labor market in positions in their professions, related discipline or another.

Research Philosophy and Assumptions

The philosophical and epistemological assumptions are the foundation on which researchers begin the investigation at hand. To give it an equitable interpretation and promote an understanding, researchers must responsibly conduct it with consideration to all its implications, challenges, virtues, and possibilities (Merriam, 2009).

My assumption is that information is continually constructed by people as they partake in and make sense of an occurrence, experience, or phenomenon. This assumption underpins qualitative analysis. Therefore, a qualitative approach is the best suited to explore the case of Venezuelan refugee professionals' career experiences, to collect and relate their stories, and report their lived experiences, which may help to elevate their voices as refugee communities are often marginalized. A qualitative approach is often used with refugees in humanitarian crisis, to deepen an understanding of their experiences, because sometimes researchers do not need to know how many but how (Bloch, 1999; Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997; Preston, 1991). A qualitative approach allowed me to collect and interpret several viewpoints and it was especially useful for this exploratory case study.

Case Study Approach

I chose a case study approach because it was suited for my research questions which:

1. Seek to explain a contemporary phenomenon in depth.
2. Explore a current real-life case
3. Describe a bounded system-time and place

A case study provides the opportunity to construct a real-life picture. It is "most appropriate for dealing with a subject that is context dependent, complex, unusual, or where there is some ambiguity" (Yin, 2018, p. 52).

A case is a spatially defined phenomenon (a unit) that is seen at a single moment in time or across a period of time. Another connotation of a case study is that the unit under investigation is not fully typical of the population, therefore, there is no guarantee the sample and population unit will be homogeneous. Thus, the researcher's goal is not to predict or generalize the findings.

By definition a case study's sample is small, comprising a single case or a dozen instances the researcher submits to formal analysis; it is the direct topic of a research or case study (Gerring, 2006). According to Hancock & Algozzine (2006) case studies are in-depth examinations and descriptions of a single unit or system that is constrained by place and time. Researchers seek to obtain an in-depth knowledge of circumstances and their meaning for people involved through case studies. Individuals, events, or organizations are frequent topics in case studies. Merriam (2009) affirms case study insights can have a direct impact on policy, practices, and future research.

In this dissertation, my aim was to investigate the barriers and facilitators to career development of Venezuelan refugee professionals in Florida, United States. This means that my primary focus of data collection was on what was happening to this group in the specific setting and how this context affected the group (Patton, 2015). "There is emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself" (Stake, 1995, p. 8).

I chose a qualitative case study because with their Venezuelan ancestry, common cultural background, shared experience of forced migration, and their intentions to resume their careers in South Florida, this group of Venezuelan refugee professionals is bound by policy, laws and regulations, common challenges and opportunities.

Purpose of the Study

The overarching purpose of this study was to explore the barriers and facilitators Venezuelan refugee professionals encountered in South Florida, United States to be able to resume working in the professions for which they trained in the origin country**.** To be more specific the purpose was twofold, first to explore how the human capital acquired in the origin

country impacted obtaining quality employment and aided or hindered credential recognition in their assimilation and resettlement processes. Second, the role (if any) social capital played within refugee and immigrant communities to gain access to meaningful employment and ultimately in their integration.

Researcher's Positionality

By foregrounding my positionality, my aim was to gain the readers' trust through sincerity, not only by explaining the research processes in this methodology section, but also by highlighting the crucial moments of self-reflection regarding my own role as a researcher, my relation to the interviewees, my own biases and my nationality and identity as a Venezuelan woman.

I understand that I am constructed by my life's experiences, which tend to influence my perceptions and outlooks. I made conscious attempts to recognize this positionality as I interacted with the research participants during the interviews. My experiences and biases were not the only ones reflected in the research, also were those of the research participants, which is evident in their narratives.

As for my background, I was born and raised in Venezuela. I come from a middle-class family of well-educated parents. I grew up when the Venezuelan economy was booming, as a result, middle class families enjoyed many privileges. I attended top private schools in Venezuela, started to travel abroad frequently in my early adolescence, and was the first one in my family to attend college in the United States. My two siblings are both college graduates and both have master degrees.

The majority of people in my social and work circles are well educated and some highly skilled. By now, most have also left Venezuela and are successful professionals in multiple

countries around the world. One of my assumptions was that most Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers who make it to the U.S., are well-educated, and except perhaps for those who lack English language skills, can compete in the U.S., job market. To be more specific, my assumption was that the profile of many refugees and asylum seekers who make it to the U.S., is often different from the refugees and asylum seekers who flee Venezuela to bordering countries in terms of the latter having lower education level and less financial resources available to them.

I must acknowledge I conducted this research from the lens of a Venezuelan doctoral student in the U.S., who left the country eleven years ago due to my discontent with and disapproval of the ruling government's abusive behavior and constant human right violations, among other reasons. Before departing, I often took part in protests, suffered repression from security forces, who indiscriminately fired tear gas and rubber bullets to break up thousands of demonstrators. I witnessed firsthand the suffering of the Venezuelan people, the shortages of food and basic goods, the rampant violence.

While the focus of the research was on the barriers and facilitators to their resuming the professions in the U. S., I inevitably had to uncover their professional backgrounds, as well as, the circumstances that led them to seek refuge in the U.S. I had a sense of relief in my assumption that none of my participants would be a government supporter, after all if they are in the U.S., as refugees and asylum seekers, it must mean they were displaced, in need of protection and their lives and well-being at risk. I make this point to highlight that I have always been a member of the Venezuelan opposition, ever since Hugo Chavez established his socialism of the 21st century regime, a transformation process that eventually led the country to the abyss in which it is today.

Mason (1996) highly advises researchers ponder their position, ask themselves difficult questions as self-examination and/or reflexivity throughout the investigative process. My participants' stories, while difficult to hear, were nonetheless very consistent with how I perceived the government's authoritarian, violent and oppressive style to be. I found no dissonance and no surprises. Nevertheless, it took mental and psychological preparation on my part to hear the difficult stories of the lived experiences of my compatriots. I had to brace myself and keep my composure when interviewing them, and most of all it was critical for me to genuinely show empathy for what they had to endure. I was successful in establishing rapport with all of them early in the research process.

Research Method

For data collection I used semi-structured interviews with participants as the primary data gathering source. I also consulted with the program directors who attend to the career needs of refugees at Broward College and Miami-Dade College, both sponsored by the State of Florida, Department of Children and Families, Career Source Broward, Refugee Services Program, with grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement. See Appendix D for a sample of the questions I asked them.

I performed a document analysis as my secondary data collection process. To better understand the situation of Venezuelan refugees in the U.S., I collected reports prepared by Non-profit organizations, UNHCR, the Migration Policy Institute, Human Rights Watch, and other organizations. A collection of these reports, along with the communication with the directors of refugee career programs, aided me in understanding the U.S. government's refugee policies, how they have evolved over time, how they affect refugee professionals' forced career interruption

and decrease their earning power. In Table 3, I provided a summary of the methods, the information and the sources for each.

Table 3. Summary of Methods, Targeted Information and Sources

Research Methods	Targeted Information	Sources
1. **Semi-structured interviews**	a. Background and context of departure b. Context of arrival c. Degree(s) and years of experience d. Language ability e. Impact of social networks including family in the U.S. f. Career expectations g. Credential recognition or non-recognition h. Finding work in profession i. Asylum petition status j. Relationships with Venezuelan communities k. Licensing process l. Access to education (career-related and/or ESL)	Twelve (12) Venezuelan refugee professionals
2. **Email and informal interviews**	a. Experience with Venezuelan refugee professionals b. Governing education policies for refugees c. Partnerships with private sector potential employers d. Foreign university degree evaluation and translation services e. Continuing education services for refugee professionals f. Work readiness and employability skills training for professionals g. Employment opportunities	Refugee career support experts: Refugee program director at Broward College Refugee program coordinator at Miami-Dade College
3. **Document analysis**	a. Refugee reception and placement process b. Asylum petition process c. Work authorization processing times d. State approach to refugee resettlement e. Policies and regulations for refugees and asylum seekers f. Licensing requirements for regulated and unregulated professions	Career Source Broward, Florida Department of Children and Families, Migration Policy Institute, Office of Refugee Resettlement, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of State, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Participants Sampling

I recruited participants through purposive sampling since the focus was on particular characteristics of the Venezuelan refugee professional population, which enabled me to answer my research questions. Patton (2002) who is considered an authority on purposive sampling stated the following:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (Patton, 2002, p. 230)

I lived most of my childhood and adult life in Venezuela, as a result, I have access to various sources for recruiting participants. These included, Venezuelan refugees groups and communities, Venezuelan journalists and media personalities and personal contacts in South Florida. The participants complied with specific criteria as follows:

1. Born and raised in Venezuela.
2. The minimum required qualification is a bachelor's degree obtained in Venezuela.
3. Venezuelan professional refugees and not immigrants, who have petitioned asylum in the United States and who reside in South Florida, the region in the United States with the largest number Venezuelan refugees and immigrants.
4. Ages 25 and above, male and female. The reason for choosing 25 years as the minimum age is because college degrees in Venezuela take five (5) years to complete. The average age for graduation is 23 years. This would give at least 2 years of professional experience as opposed to recent graduates with no work-related experience and less human capital. It

is worth noting that according to the Pew Research Center (2016), 53% of Venezuelan immigrants in the U.S., 25 years of age and older have at least a college degree, compared to 29% of the Hispanic population.

5. Currently employed in a formal job in their profession or another. Formal job or formal sector defined as when an organization hires an employee through an established working agreement that includes, salary or wages, health benefits, defined work hours and work days, and income sources on which income taxes must be paid (Quain, 2019, para. 2).

The best participants for the study were the ones who met the selection/inclusion criteria described above and who were willing to take part in the study. Building trust with participants is a fundamental part of the effectiveness and sustainability of any research project. Once I selected the participants, I started communicating with them and making sure they could ask all the questions they had. As a cultural insider, meaning a person who has the knowledge of the language and familiarity with the culture (Birman, 2006), I believe participants felt comfortable to open up and give me an honest account of their experiences. At the same time, I had to be cautious this did not turn counterproductive, and they withheld information assuming I already knew, which may have been true but, I needed the participants to tell me their stories from their perspective. Probing interview questions were helpful in this regard. I conducted the interviews in Spanish.

Participant Recruitment Strategies

I sent an explanatory email of the research purpose to the following:

1. Personal contacts in Florida
2. Professional contacts including Venezuelan journalists and TV personalities residing in South Florida.

3. Venezuelan Refugee Organizations: Political Persecuted Venezuelans in Exile (Veppex),
4. Venezuelan Exiles Association of Miami
5. Venezuela Awareness Organization.

The Participants

I provided all participants with an overview of the study's goals and methods prior to their participation in the study. Before I started the data collection process, I gave the research participants an informed consent form with a study description, in accordance with the requirements of the Texas A&M University's IRB. The participants were informed of their right to leave the study at any moment. The informed consent form also included my faculty advisor's and the IRB contact information for the participants to have the freedom to address and discuss their questions, or concerns if they simply wanted to discuss it with another person and not with me.

I gave the participants a copy of their interview transcripts when I finished transcribing the whole session. This conforms to Merriam's (2009) idea of member checking, which improves the trustworthiness of qualitative research.

Data Collection

I conducted a total of 12 extended semi-structured in-depth interviews with those who came to settle unofficially, arrived by air to Miami International Airport with tourist and business visas, and applied for asylum afterwards. I asked the interviewees to reflect on their settlement experience in the U.S., including their perspectives on employment in their professions.

The answers to specific questions about employment in their professions shaped the method of analysis. The conditions and circumstances in which they arrived, what they faced when they needed to access vital educational, job and social services and opportunities. Their

responses were consistent and substantial in their narratives when referring to individual settlement as a whole. Additionally, in more broader terms, the engagement within the communities where they resettled. I present the emerging themes and categories in the data analysis section.

Semi-structured Interviews

The primary method of data collection for this research study was through in-depth individual interviews with Venezuelan refugee professionals in South Florida. "One of the most important sources of case study evidence is the interview" (Yin, 2018, p. 176).

In-depth interviews were the best option for my research questions because they help in providing explanations of how key events take place as well as the participants' insights. When refugees tell their stories through self-narration, they can share their experiences about their lives as refugees and the assimilation process in the host country.

My research method required an interview style that was flexible, open and conversational for participants to feel comfortable sharing the experiences relevant to my study. I had anticipated 60 to 90 minutes for the interviews, plus a 30-minute follow up call, but a couple of the interviews took between 90 and 120 minutes and 60 minutes for the follow up calls.

Ganga & Scott (2006) posit the product of mutual cultural awareness is what they call "diversity in proximity*"* which essentially means insider researchers are better able to identify both the links that connect them with the participants and the social gaps that separate them (p. 2). Insider status can make researchers welcomed in a community, but it can also influence the way others see them in this relatively near social environment. I can report that in this research, participants were welcoming, opened up, and narrated their stories in a candid manner.

Triangulation

I dealt with bias and improved convergent validity through the use of multiple sources of evidence, documents, government records and refugee support agencies in the state of Florida. I was then in a better position to confirm (or not) the findings from the interviews. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as "the extent to which an inquirer could persuade audiences that the findings are worth paying attention to" (p. 300). Some of the strategies I undertook to strengthen trustworthiness and credibility were member checks, thick descriptions, reflexivity, audit trails, and field notes.

Two of the most valuable resources for data triangulation were the director of Broward College's Refugees Education Through Career and Academic Pathways (RECAP) and the Coordinator of the Miami-Dade College Refugee/Entrant Vocational Educational Services Training (REVEST) program.

Member Checking

Member checking should be an ongoing process, during the interviews, the researcher can reflect back to the participant to make sure the interpretation is correct. Additionally, I planned for a 30-minute follow up call after I completed the transcriptions. I reviewed the interview transcripts with each respective participant so they could review and confirm if what they had said or meant to say I transcribed correctly, or if anything was misinterpreted and needed changing, and/or if they wished to add or eliminate any information. Nevertheless, these follow-up calls with all participants ended up being between 90 and 120 minutes long, with one participant calling me a third time, to talk about some additional information she thought would be useful, a thorough summary of which she sent to me by email after our call.

Subjectivity Trail

Siegesmund (2008) draws our attention to how qualitative scholars have actively investigated subjectivity, and have indicated its constructive contribution to the research process. Many scholars frame the debate on objectivity-subjectivity as conflict between enlightenment and post-modern ideals. However, enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Johann Wolfgang Goethe, advocate for the positive effects of subjectivity, as well as eminent scientists of the 20th century. Take Albert Einstein for instance, who believed that "if science was limited by objectivity, then it would not be capable of fresh thinking or producing original insights" (p. 2).

Given that as a researcher I was a cultural insider; I was on high alert mode for assumption bias. Ganga & Scott (2006) define a cultural insider as a researcher who performs interviews with participants who share common cultural, linguistic, racial, national and religious background. They add this insider status is of added significance when research requires social contact between a migrant researcher and migrant participants who all reside in a different country, which corresponds to this dissertation.

Furthermore, as an insider researcher, the boundary between private and public selves is different, closer to my private self, than it would be when conducting research as an outsider and this is important because it can affect the social dynamics that form a qualitative interview. I had to bear this in mind.

I kept a subjectivity audit. Took notes about situations connected to my research which brought about strong positive or negative feelings. The outcome was a list of different aspects of the research that "describe areas in which the researcher's own beliefs and background influenced his or her perceptions and actions in the research setting" (Dooley, 2002, p. 341). I highlighted this process and disclosed the areas and beliefs that influenced me in my researcher's

positionality statement. While it is true that nobody is totally free from bias, I needed to let readers know from the beginning what I did to handle bias in my research.

Audit Trail

I included examples of the coding process I followed with descriptions of how the themes emerged and the rationale for clustering themes together. For data synthesis, I discussed the categorical structure and hierarchies of themes, concepts, categories, and relationships. I explained the hierarchies and structures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, I used a mind mapping software to help me establish the relationships between and among themes and categories.

Field Notes

Field notes about interview can be generated at multiple times. I took small, keyword-based notes during the interviews, but took more notes during the member checking calls which I did not record, as they were meant to be rather short follow-up calls, although in the end, they were longer and sometimes richer in details than the first interviews. These short notes were helpful in remembering important aspects in more detail following the interactions.Although field notes from the participants' interviews were critical during the interviews as well as during the member checking calls, the documentation on state, national and international laws and regulations for refugees also elicited field notes as they provide insights into the overall environment (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Data Analysis

In this study, I collected the data and began the analysis and interpretation in phases, because data collection occurred in two stages. I mentioned earlier due to Covid-19 some of the participants who had agreed to take part had to withdraw. I had to start a second stage of

recruiting efforts. Once the second stage was complete, I transcribed the interviews verbatim in Spanish first and read and reread them, then, I watched each video interviews at least twice with the finalized transcriptions to verify their accuracy. Then, I proceeded to translate them from Spanish to English and thereafter started the coding process. I considered the possibility of using a digital voice-to-text application, but soon realized it would not work well due to the informal environment, the conversational style of the interviews, and the idiomatic expressions unique to Venezuelans.

Transcribing the interviews helped me get acquainted with the primary data, so critical in data analysis, and especially useful later for coding. I wanted to make sure I was basing the emerging trends on the original raw data. My primary goal was through interviews, to reflect about the subjective perspective of Venezuelan refugee professionals who shared their experiences and perceptions about the barriers and facilitators they faced while attempting to restart their careers in Florida, United States.

Following data collection from 12 interviews, documents, grey literature, reports and personal communication analysis with federal-sponsored Florida colleges' representatives who aid refugees professionals with employment readiness. I entered all transcripts into the Quirkos (2020) qualitative data analysis software. I began a comprehensive process of data coding and identification of themes.

First, I identified and labeled the concepts in the participants' answers to each question. For example, unrecognized credentials, employment, stressors, and identity loss issues were some concepts that I could identify during first level coding. Grinnell & Unrau (2018) referred to meaning units as the unit(s) of data comprising a single concept, whether the unit is one line of data or in a paragraph of data as it happened in this case. I also labeled all applicable concepts or

units of meaning if an answer contained more than one. I then moved on to second level coding, from which I sought to extract more abstract interpretations of what the participants articulated.

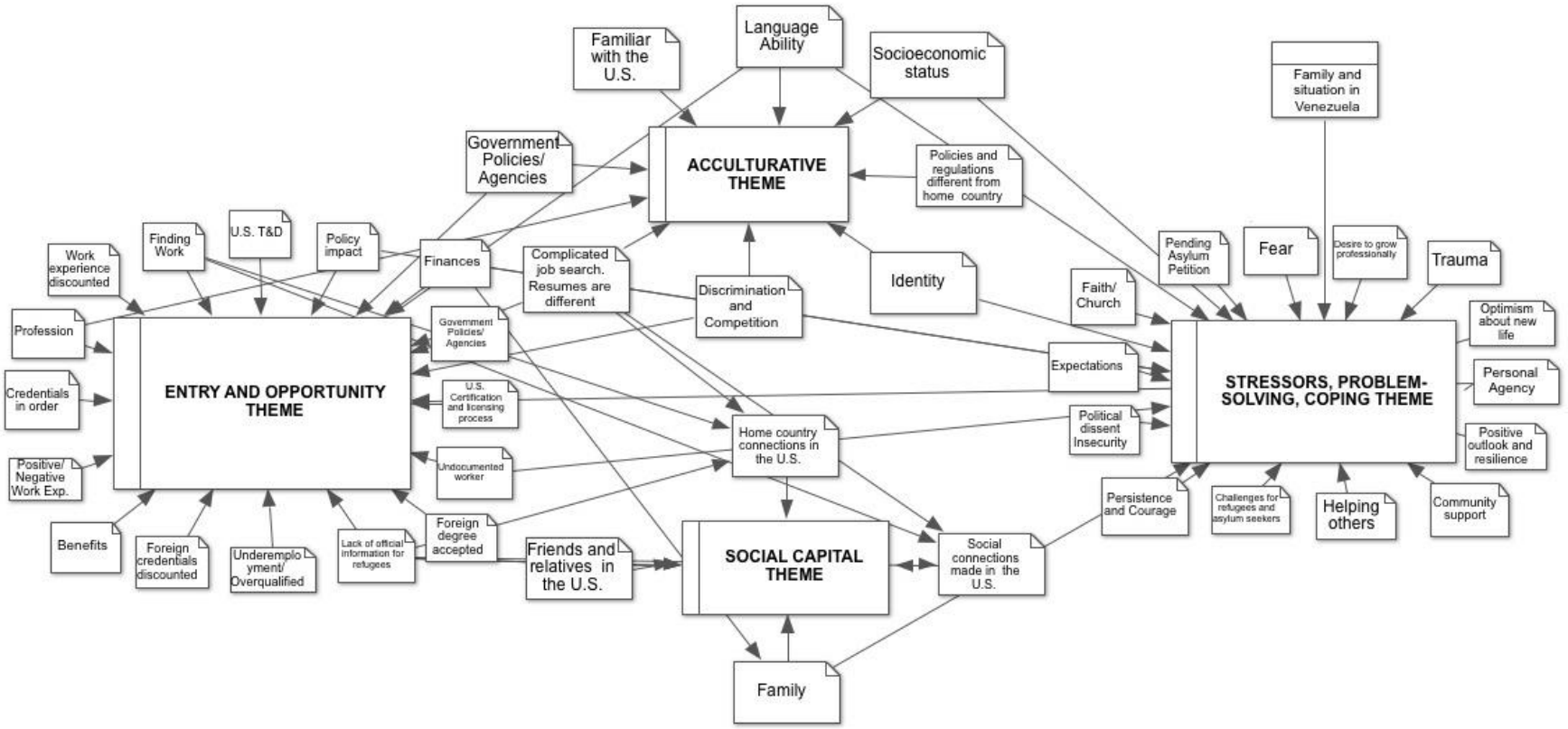
Peer debriefing

When I started labeling and defining the major themes, I asked one professor and two doctoral students for help in reviewing the themes I had created after the analysis. I received valuable feedback. For starters, I had identified a theme as cultural differences and in reviewing the codes the professor suggested using acculturation instead. She even went further and provided an article on acculturation theory. This term was definitely a better fit for the theme. I chose to name it acculturative theme. Another important feedback I received from the doctoral students was regarding the stressors theme. I had initially separated stressors from problem-solving attitude and coping mechanisms but in exploring them further, they suggested even though refugees experienced stressors in the U.S., most of the major stressors were related to the difficult experience they endured in Venezuela and their worries about the family members who remained there. However, part of their adaptation had to do with how they coped with the stressors overall and how they solved the countless issues they faced, so I grouped them under the stressors, problem-solving and coping theme.

Even though the Quirkos qualitative data analysis software was invaluable for coding and analyzing long transcripts and documents. I also found it helpful to create a mind map. In the late 1960s, a British psychologist, Tony Buzan, coined the term mind map to describe a simple method of brainstorming and analysis. To draw a mind map is to collect all the important points of a process or a problem, and graphically indicate the different relationships. By drawing mind maps one can "delve into the core of the matter and at the same time see the big picture. Mind maps are on the one hand microcosmic, and on the other macrocosmic" (Buzan, 2018, p. 18).

Thus, the mind map of themes and codes allowed me to see how they connect with each other and to more than one theme and illustrate the overall complexity of the resettlement process. For example, language ability in the acculturative theme is directly related to the credential certification process in the entry and opportunity theme, because the process requires strong English language skills, which at the same time can become a source of stress and/or encourage personal agency in refugees "as producers of their own positive development" (Obschonka, et al., 2018, p. 174). See Figure 5.

Figure 5. Mind Map of Codes and Themes



Chapter III Summary

I started this chapter with an explanation of how the Covid-19 pandemic affected my study. This was necessary for readers to understand the challenges I encountered while trying to recruit participants, a change in the mode of the interviews from face-to-face to an online format, and a change request to the IRB to reflect the new modality.

I also addressed my research philosophy and assumptions, the rationale for using a qualitative case study with the Venezuelan refugee professionals as the unit of analysis, to explore the barriers and facilitators they encountered to resume working in the professions. I disclosed my positionality as a researcher aimed at gaining the readers trust, highlighting the crucial moments of self-reflection regarding my own role as a researcher, my relation to the interviewees, my own biases and my background.

Next, I discussed my research method, participant sampling and recruitment strategies, data collection and data analysis, including use of Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis software package for generating codes, categories, and themes. In addition to the software, I also used mind mapping of codes and themes to get at visual presentation of the relationships and how they interrelated with each other as well as to more than one theme. In the next chapter I will cover the Venezuelan refugee professionals' stories and the findings.

CHAPTER IV

CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the 12 participants. The participants are Venezuelan refugee or asylum seeker professionals, nine females and three males, with varied experience levels, ranging from 6 to 27 years. Next, I present a detailed description of the analysis process, emerging themes, and categories from the data analysis and responses to the research questions.

I recruited the participants who voluntarily agreed to take part in this case study with the help of personal and professional contacts and refugee non-profit organizations. I met with potential participants and discussed the purpose of this study and its procedures.

I interviewed each participant over the course of a single session lasting between 60 and 105 minutes. All interviews I conducted over Zoom video calls and I recorded them with the participants' permission. I mentioned earlier due to Covid-19 some of the participants who had initially agreed to take part had to withdraw. I had to start a second stage of recruiting efforts. Once completed, this is the process I followed:

1. I transcribed the interviews verbatim in Spanish first and read and reread them, then, I watched each video interviews at least twice while checking the finalized transcriptions to verify their accuracy.
2. I planned for a 30-to-45-minute follow-up call after I completed the transcriptions. I reviewed the interview transcripts with each respective participant so they could review and confirm if what they had said or meant to say I transcribed correctly, or if anything was misinterpreted and needed changing, and/or if they wished to add or eliminate any information.

3. The intricacy of reality is represented through the raw data in the full recordings. Thus, the first step in analysis was to create a workable categorization or coding scheme
4. Due to the large amount of data, I used Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis software program to assist me in generating codes, categories, and themes.
5. Through thematic analysis I began the process of finding, coding, categorizing, and labeling the key patterns. First, I began by reviewing each interview repeatedly with the intention of finding first level coding, which concentrated on the explicit basic ideas and information expressed by the participants, and then, moved on to second level coding, by which I sought to extract more abstract interpretations of what the participants articulated. This allowed me to categorize the data under different sections.
6. Once the themes began to emerge, I was making sure they addressed the research questions. As the significance of a theme "is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research questions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). For instance, identity issues appeared 4 times but were critical and directly related to the non-recognition of their credentials reported by the group and a considerable source of stress while they worked on reconstructing their identities.
7. After, I employed a peer-review strategy, I asked one professor and two doctoral students for help in reviewing the themes I had come up with after the analysis of the transcripts. I asked them to check for evidence of the themes and assertions, and verifying them with the original data. The final themes were: acculturative, entry and opportunity, social, and stressors, problem-solving, coping mechanisms.
8. In addition, I analyzed secondary data sources. "A major strength of case study research

is the ability to use multiple sources and techniques" (Dooley, 2002, p. 340). I started collecting secondary sources of information before and during the primary data collection from the interviews. I analyzed the interviews from the refugee career support experts, reports and data from the Florida Department of Children and Families, Migration Policy Institute, Office of Refugee Resettlement, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of State, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Despite the differences in their stories of arrival and settlement, their respective attitudes to obtaining meaningful employment in their professions and credential recognition shared a commonality and a similar level of frustration, which speaks less to the settlement process itself than to a wider state of marginality.

More than half of the participants are veterinarians. The case of Venezuelan veterinary medicine doctors is a major finding and merits a special mention as an exceptional circumstance and opportunity for these refugees. After the refugees' stories, I will dedicate a section to explain in detail the remarkable achievement of these professionals in Florida.

Another source of information about refugees' career options in South Florida came from the director of Broward College's federal government funded career assistance program for refugees. She shared with me her perspective on the barriers and facilitators Venezuelan refugees encounter after resettlement. The overarching goal of the program is to provide comprehensive assistance to refugee professionals in the areas of English language ability, degree evaluation, employability skills, and customized career development plans. Similarly, the Miami-Dade College refugees' education program coordinator provided information about the goals and mission of the program in terms of the careers and vocational options for refugees.

The Participants

The participants' stories provide us with individual perspectives on their own experiences, beginning with their education in Venezuela and what prompted them to flee and continuing with the barriers and facilitators they have encountered to be able to work in their professions during their resettlement in South Florida. The participants also provided some final thoughts and reflections about their experience and about what other Venezuelan refugees need to bear in mind when considering migrating to the U.S.

Through the stories the readers can draw insights into how the participants have worked hard to overcome systemic and cultural challenges, to gain independence, break away from poverty and/or low-wage subsistence jobs, re-establish their professional identities or create new ones, enter the U.S. mainstream workforce, and generate self and family sustaining wages. The order of presentation of their stories is not significant.

In table 4 below, I provide a summary of the participants' demographics such as gender, age, spoken languages, home country education, asylum status, years of professional experience, and year of arrival in the U.S. The identities of all participants are concealed via the use of pseudonyms.

Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of Participants and Asylum Status

Pseudonym, gender, age on arrival in the U.S.	**Languages Spoken on arrival**	**Prior Education Foreign degree**	**Year of arrival in the U.S.**	**Asylum Status**	**Years of professional experience on arrival**
Antonio Bolivar Male 32	Spanish and English	B.S. in Civil Engineering Specialization in Finance	2011	Approved	9
Estela Fermin Female 34	Spanish and English	B.S. in Human Resources. Specialization in Security and Industrial Hygiene and Occupational Health	2011	Approved	10
Georgina Hernandez Female 43	Spanish	B.S. in Elementary Education	2014	Pending	25
Corina Duran Female 31	Spanish and intermediate English	B.S. in Early Childhood Education and Master Degree in Educational Orientation	2013	Approved	8
Isabel Jimenez Female 29	Spanish and Advanced English	B.S. in Veterinary Medicine	2016	Approved	6
Karina Leon Female 34	Spanish and basic English	B.S. in Veterinary Medicine	1999	Approved	10
Mercedes Navas Female 39	Spanish	B.S. in Veterinary Medicine	2017	Pending	15
Olga Parra Female 30	Spanish and Advanced English	B.S. in Veterinary Medicine. Specialization in surgery	2015	Pending	7
Rosario Tovar Female 31	Spanish. Intermediate English	B.S. in Veterinary Medicine. Master Degree in Small Animals(Spain)	2017	Pending	11
Ursula Vegas Female 35	Spanish	B.S. in Veterinary Medicine.	2015	Pending	10
William Xavier Male 31	Spanish Advanced English	B.S. in Business Administration	2014	Pending	7
Yanis Zerpa Male 50	Spanish and English	B.S. in Veterinary Medicine.	2012	Approved	27

The Participants' Stories

In this study I used a qualitative case study approach. A case is a spatially defined phenomenon or a unit that is seen at a single moment in time or across a period of time. By definition a case study's sample is small, comprising a single case or a dozen instances the researcher submits to formal analysis. In this dissertation I aimed to investigate the barriers and facilitators to career development of Venezuelan refugee professionals in Florida, United States, by focusing on what was happening to this group in the specific setting and how this context affected the group (Patton, 2015).

Antonio Bolivar

Introduction

Antonio is in his early forties, married with two children. He was born and raised in Venezuela. He comes from a middle-upper class family. Both his parents were college graduates and well educated. His father was a very successful civil engineer an owner of his own company, Antonio followed his steps. He has a younger brother who is also a college graduate. Antonio attended one of the best private universities in Caracas, the capital, and like his father majored in civil engineering.

Antonio's story and education in Venezuela

As mentioned earlier, most college degrees in Venezuela take 5 years to complete. During his fourth year in college, Antonio decided he needed to brush up his English language skills before graduating so he would be better positioned in the job market. Antonio searched for the best programs in various countries and opted to move to Australia for a year to learn it well. He also decided that the best way to do it would be to live with an Australian family, that way he would be forced to speak English every day. In addition, he also attended an English as a second

language school in a semi-intensive course format.

Suddenly, during the interview, he got a serious look and paused to say that some of his peers, and ever some professors criticized his decision to go abroad before finishing up his degree. He proudly stated:

> I come from a home in which our parents encouraged independent thinking. We had the freedom to think and choose what we thought was best for us.

Antonio went back to Venezuela and completed his civil engineering degree 18 months later. Antonio's father wanted and expected his son to come to work in the family business, which in recent years had experienced an exponential growth. As a result, Antonio felt that for him to fulfill the role his father expected of him, he needed to learn more about finance and accounting. He pursued and completed a specialization degree in finance and went to work with his father. A few years later, by 2009, the company was blooming, their developments around the country totaled 24 modern buildings and that milestone marked the beginning of their nightmare. To put the circumstances in context, some background information about the situation in the country at that period in time will offer a clearer picture.

In support of his declaration to build a socialism for the twenty-first century in the country, president Hugo Chávez expropriated businesses, from foreign-owned and domestic banks; cattle ranches, including those of the British company Agroflora, and assets from Cargill, in the food industry. He also seized control of operations of three large international cement companies, Cemex (Mexico), Holcin (Switzerland) and LaFarge (France), and General Motors' manufacturing auto plant, to name a few (Vasquez, 2012). The expropriations Chávez executed are well documented as are the numerous lawsuits and international arbitration cases against the government of Venezuela.

Chávez expropriated the 24 buildings that belonged to Antonio's family. Antonio and his

father with a team of lawyers , decided to sue the government for the illegal takeover of their assets. This is when things took a dangerous turn. Antonio and his family became victims of relentless persecution and violent house raids. Government's security forces and armed groups known as *Colectivos* harassed and threatened them constantly. Colectivos are irregular, armed, violent, leftist Venezuelan community organizations who support Nicolás Maduro (Human Rights Watch's Americas Division and Emergencies, 2017). Given the country's lack of judicial independence, Antonio and his father had nowhere to turn for protection. They soon realized they had to flee for their lives. He explains:

> We used to come to the United States quite often, it was not really an option to come to the United States to live, then it became one after what happened to us it was not an option, it was the only alternative. So, we either went ahead or we went ahead because there was no going back and, to this day I cannot go back, and I am a U.S. citizen but, I cannot go to Venezuela.

Antonio and his father fled from Venezuela in 2011. They arrived in Miami, where they had some contacts. They rented a place and hired an immigration law firm to represent them in their asylum petition. In an unprecedented expeditious process, the immigration officer who interviewed them for the asylum petition, approved the case in situ. Antonio and his father presented irrefutable evidence, in documents, press reports and Internet webpages covering the highly publicized illegal expropriation. Since the lives of family members remaining in Venezuela were at risk, he immediately made arrangements to get them out of the country, shortly thereafter they reunited in Miami.

Barriers

When Antonio began to search for a job in civil engineering, he was referred to the Florida Department of Children and Families (FDCF) which is under the auspice of ORR and the within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to assist refugees achieve economic

self-sufficiency and social adjustment (Florida Department of Children and Families, n.d.). Antonio had been coming to the U.S., on business and leisure trips for years. He was well acquainted with the American culture, but as a business man and a tourist, not as a resident. He decided to reach out to the FDCF hoping they may have some interesting job offers through local companies in the area. He was very disappointed to find out this was not the case: He pointed out:

> They never had anything (jobs), my conclusion was that the Department of Children and Families is more focused on people with very, very low level of education, and that was the type of person who they can help and offer a wide range of options, but people with an intermediate or high level of education, they cannot. My first job was actually through a friend of my dad who knows the owner of a dealership and there I started working selling cars.

After he worked for a few months at the car dealership, he got a new opportunity through a friend in a telecommunications company. He worked in sales business to business selling Internet services and IP telephony for companies. He explained the requirements to be able to work for this company:

> They did require a college degree. It did not matter in which career but, you had to be a graduate and had to show proof that you were a college graduate and have a level or knowledge of intermediate English to be able to work, medium to high level, to be able to work there, a beginner (low) level of English was not accepted.

Antonio worked in this company for two and a half years until he got another job offer with another telecommunications cable company. He never stopped looking for a civil engineer related job:

> I tried hard for all those years that I worked in telecommunications, I tried to look for a job in construction and there was no way to get a job in construction and, I have years of experience and also in doing large budgets for building projects, there was no way.

He expressed his frustration for not being able to work in civil engineering during all those years. He believes there just was no support for refugee professionals, unfair to him and all refugee professionals who come to the country seeking protection. He asserts:

> The degree is not recognized in the United States. When one arrives here in the United States, no matter the degree one brings, one starts from scratch, the degree is not worth anything, what is worth is the work experience that one acquires in the United States and any degree or study that one can do in the United States has much more value than ... some degree brought from ... from another country.

When I asked him about the importance of accumulated experience, his response was the following:

> When you get here the years of work experience are worth nothing. They vanish. All the diplomas, certificates and all the credentials I have obtained in my previous work and my accumulated professional experience are not valued or appreciated in the American labor market, which leaves me with one choice which is to start all over again to acquire new skills and expertise. However, I was not willing to accept that. I am not going to work in storage, moving boxes.

Antonio did not get discouraged by the barriers he faced when trying to find employment related to his profession. On the contrary, he strived to modify the effect of risk in a positive direction.

Facilitators

Antonio's next step was to find out what he needed to become a state licensed general contractor which would allow him to do any type of construction. Antonio found out through a friend from Venezuela, where he could start looking for information. He soon began to get all the requirements and study materials. He had to prepare to take a series of examinations, and in addition, some of the requisites included a college diploma related to construction, and proof of at least 5 years of experience in the field. I asked him how he managed to prepare for the exams and to provide the supporting documents. He stated:

> Generally, a person prepares for a year. I studied and reached an agreement with my wife and family and actually studied four hours a day in addition to work because I worked full time. Four hours a day plus eight hours on weekends, I mean eight hours on Saturday and eight hours on Sunday, sixteen hours of study on weekends and it was practically as if I had a job on weekends dedicated to studying only. I passed all the exams in 4 months. I did give them my Civil Engineering diploma, and as proof, I supported my experience with photos and other documents, photos of me on the job directing and supervising the workers, master builders in the construction sites and they granted me the state license.

Antonio's self-determination to pursue his passion despite the adverse circumstances and frustration, is evident in the hard work he put into moving forward, and the sacrifice he and his family agreed to make finally paid off. He noted that without his family's unwavering support he could not have achieved his dream. He went farther and not only did he get his license, but also took the entrepreneurship route and opened his own business as a general contractor in the Miami/Ft. Lauderdale area. Unlike many refugees he had the capital to do it. As of today, his general contractor business is thriving.

Final thoughts

Antonio mentioned that besides his family's support, he gives credit to the support he received from the catholic church in the area, which serves as a voluntary agency (volag) for refugee services. The church became an important source of information, social networking, employment and career support. Many of the church's members are from Venezuela, and they have built a community. For Antonio and his family faith and spirituality play a vital role in making sense of their experience of displacement and exile. Until today they continue to worship in this church and do voluntary work with incoming refugees.

Estela Fermin

Introduction

Estela is a 39-year-old woman, born and raised in Caracas. She was 30 years old when

she arrived with her son in the U.S. She was not the main asylum petitioner, her husband was.

Estela's story and education in Venezuela

Estela's family experienced political persecution. They received constant threats for voicing their discontent with the government policies in their community. Their home was also ransacked, their computers and laptops taken by military counterintelligence forces, whose excuse was to find any information and evidence of their plans to incite violent protests against the government.

As a means to stop any dissenting opinions, the government oppressed and jailed any person or political group whose views opposed it, under conspiracy charges. It went as far as closure of communication media and large fines for companies and electronic media, among other censorship sanctions. The pace of politically motivated arrests in Venezuela continued to rise signaling rising repression under the socialist regime.

When Estela's husband asylum petition was approved, she and her son arrived at the Miami airport in 2011. She said during the time she had to wait; her biggest fear was that the asylum petition would not be approved or that it would take too long. As time went by, she felt their lives were at risk. Fortunately, the asylum petition was approved shortly, since the evidence of the persecution was public knowledge and reported by local and foreign media.

Estela first got an associate degree in Human Resources. Associate degrees in Venezuela take an average of three years to complete. Usually, five semesters of courses and the last semester is for an internship. Once she completed it, she decided she wanted to get her bachelor of science degree in HR and she finished it in two more years. She worked at Telcel, founded in 1991, Telcel was the first company to offer cellular mobile phone service in Venezuela. Bellsouth bought the company and began to offer Internet service, and later sold it to Telefonica,

a Spanish multinational telecommunications company, with headquarters in Madrid, Spain. Eventually, the Telcel brand disappeared, giving way to the Movistar brand in Venezuela and through the South American region.

Estela went through these changes and acquisitions and adapted successfully. She worked on a rotational assignment; a consecutive series of professional assignments designed to develop the Movistar's in-house talent. Training and coaching were her favorite areas and the ones in which she specialized the most. She also obtained a specialized degree in Security and Industrial Hygiene and Occupational Health.

When I asked her about her English language skills when she arrived, she said her parents thought it was crucial for Estela to learn English well. During the last two years of high school, she took English lessons three hours a day. Estela recalls:

> I took an intensive, immersive course and I went from basic to a conversational level. My first jobs were in bilingual positions and I practiced it but afterwards as I did not work in American companies, I did not practice it anymore and it stayed there as ..., it was there as ... without exercise. It was in a dormant state.

Facilitators

Estela arrived in the U.S., with a level of English ability with which she could understand almost everything but, felt she was no longer as fluent as before. She took advantage of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses the FDCF offered refugees and asylum seekers.

Because of the credentials and English ability, the FDCF referred Estela to Broward College to do a four-month course in Human Resource Development and she received a certificate. Although she confirms this certificate was not a university degree, it was helpful to refresh her knowledge.

Estela did everything she could to get ready for the job market. Next, she found out about

an organization called CareerSource Broward (CSBD), Broward Workforce Development Board's (BWDB) administrative body, which is a federally sponsored, local agency providing companies and individuals residing in Broward County with job service solutions. CSBD offer "individual assistance with the Employ Florida website, work search programs, career coaching and counseling, and other related needs" (CareerSource Broward, 2020, para. 1)

Estela explained this organization offered her a course called professional placement network to prepare individuals on how to look for a job. She adds:

> I recommend it two hundred percent, not only do they teach you how to look for a job but also give you techniques on how to do it. One of the techniques that they tell you is that every person with whom you talk tell them you're looking for a job or call them (friends and acquaintances) even if it's to say hello and tell them you are looking for a job.

One Estela's ex-coworkers then also living in Broward County called her and told her the news about another ex-coworker who had recently moved from Venezuela to Miami. Estela had worked with her for some time, so she got her contact information and called her to offer any help, since she knew she had a young daughter, maybe she could lend her a hand, as she was not employed yet. As the conversation flowed and they caught up, her ex-coworker asked her if she was working, she said she was not, but was actively looking for work. Her co-worker said that she thought they were looking to fill a vacancy in Human Resources and that she believed Estela fit the profile. Estela explains her experience as follows:

> I sent my resume and went to the interview and everything flowed and I worked there for 5 years. The work environment was among Venezuelans, the owner was Venezuelan. The truth is that I feel that it was a great blessing for me to have worked there, of course, it was not the perfect company, it had its defects and everything, but I feel more than blessed to have worked there, the truth is it was a very nice, very enjoyable learning experience.

The fact that Estela was Venezuelan and two of her past co-workers were employed in this company and knew of the quality of her work and recommended her, was a determinant

factor in her being hired. She talked about how great the interview went, and that the company only requested a resume and a copy of her certified diploma. She gave them the certificate from Career Source Broward, but they never asked her for a U.S. degree equivalency.

Estela was hired as Regional Human Resource Manager for a company responsible for delivering a broad portfolio of services in the area of Information Technology (IT) to the Caribbean and Latin America region. Estela had regional responsibilities which included countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. She had to conduct business in English with the employees in the Caribbean islands and the experience helped sharpen her English language skills and regain her fluency.

The next logical question for me as a researcher was to find out why she had quit that job. Estela explained the reasons were twofold. First, her baby daughter's care was a priority. Her mother and mother-in-law had spent months helping her to care for her daughter while she worked, but they both had responsibilities of their own and could not continue to provide care.

Estela and her husband think a child's first years are very crucial for their growth and development and preferred to provide care at home with loved ones than taking their baby to a day care with strangers. On a cultural note, the majority of Venezuelans would rather leave child care to close family members during the early years than taking them to a daycare. Second, Estela had always wanted to get a master degree. After five years on the job, she felt she needed to grow professionally. She talked to her husband about it and they made a family decision. She would find out about graduate programs that fitted her professional needs, then she would apply and if accepted, she would only then, quit her job.

Estela began her search for a graduate program. She found a master program in Spanish Language Education that met her needs in Nova Southern University (NSU), the main campus

located in Davie, Florida. She had to submit certified copies of her transcripts, diploma and her grade point average (GPA). She was admitted to the program and in January 2018, she resigned to her job and gave them a one-month notice. The graduate program started in March of the same year. Estela noted that one of the great features of this program is that she could take online courses and attend face-to-face classes on Saturdays.

As of the time of this interview, Estela had one more course to take and an internship to finish the program. However, for the time being, Covid-19 has put on hold the completion of the internship until further notice. Estela mentioned she had received information about NSU trying to find a workaround for students to be able to finish the degree and graduate.

Estela mentioned that NSU designed this unique program for the Hispanic population and it is fully bilingual, Spanish-English. The main reason being that NSU noticed that there were many Latinos who were university graduates and were working in any job, not commensurate with their qualifications and experience . There are also people like Estela, who have a passion for teaching. She explains:

> It can also be, for example, an engineer who knows a lot about mathematics and can therefore teach mathematics from elementary to high school so they have four specialties or tracks, special education, science, mathematics and Spanish. I went for Spanish because the other three did not fit with me, that is, I can teach Spanish from first grade to the last grade of high school or university what I have in mind. Let's see what God has in store for me.

I asked her what she planned to teach when she graduates, and she was quick to say leadership, her favorite topic and one she is really passionate about. Estela added that she was willing to teach in any area related to human resources and the best aspect of the program she is doing is that she can teach in both Spanish and English. She plans to continue to study and grow. She is a life-long learner

> I have been trained in leadership and I am passionate about that subject, in fact there is a Ph.D. in leadership that I do not know if I am going to do it but, we will see what happens on the way (laughs). The thing is that here university professors earn very well, and it is an essential requirement that you have at least a master's degree, but if you have a PhD, the pay is almost double, and well, for people who likes to study is not a big deal, and I am like that.

Estela stopped to reflect on everything she had described to me and said that the topic affects her deeply, because it is her area of expertise. She said she has even thought about creating a foundation or association of some kind to raise a voice, give advice and change refugees' mindset to open their minds to the possibility that they can succeed in their careers. Nothing comes from nothing. They have to understand that to succeed in this country, they need to work hard at perfecting the English language first.

Following her desire to help other refugees and asylum seekers, she composed an email with a thorough list of available resources for job search and career growth and shared it with whoever needed it and asked to forward it to others.

She mentioned a program in a ministry of a church called Back on Track Network, which helps the people of the church in their job search but, anybody can also attend regardless if the person goes to another church or is not catholic. There is another such program in Weston to help the community with job search. In this program a group of voluntary professionals give orientation sessions to assist immigrants and refugees, and many Venezuelans attend because it is in Weston. The Weston area is also known as Westonzuela for the large number of Venezuelans who reside in the area.

Estela was raised catholic. Her faith has a prominent place in her life. She has done volunteer work with churches in the area. Many of these churches, in addition to worship services, offer assistance to refugees and asylum seekers. Pro-bono lawyers provide legal advice exclusively to asylum seekers in preparing their case for the immigration court appointment.

> Our church, it's a small church, very family-oriented, we help each other. It is really a very nice community. We support one another in the workplace, with the family or spiritually. When someone is sick, we pray together. For any type of immigrant who has a problem in the workplace, joining this type of community can be a relief, because we are like an extended family. When you have that emptiness or a void in your life, because there are many people here who are alone, maybe longing for the family and friends they left behind and that kind of thing gives you a little bit more peace.

Final thoughts

Estela has found this tight-community to be an important source of support and strength for her and her family. She believes that 85% of all church members are from Venezuela. When they meet, she finds comfort in being able to talk and use certain idiomatic expressions and everyone understands what she is saying. Estela has developed her own motto as a result of the lived experience in the U.S. She interprets it as follows:

> I have my own personal motto but when I say it to people who have been here for a short time and when I say it to people who have been here longer, the ones who have been here longer understand it, and that is that this country is a country of slow but sure things. It means that if you do things slowly and in the right manner, you behave well, don't lie to uncle Sam and do things correctly you will eventually succeed. Slowly but surely.

Georgina Hernandez

Introduction

Georgina is a 49-year-old mother of three and grandmother of five children. She is originally from La Guaira, which is the capital of the state of Vargas and the main port of the country. It is located 30 kilometers or 20 miles to the southeast of Caracas. Georgina is a graduate in Education from the Pedagogical Institute of Caracas.

Georgina's story and education in Venezuela

Her last position was in a private school where she was the owner and director. However, she noted she worked for many years in public schools, both urban and rural schools with the

Ministry of Education. She was an active member of a then powerful political party called *Democratic Action* (Acción Democrática or AD) and her party recommended her for a position within the ministry. It was customary to give recommendation letters to active party members for different positions within governmental entities.

As a student, Georgina never hesitated to protest for injustice and oppression. She reiterates she is a firm believer in freedom. When she worked in rural public schools, she saw a lot of inequality, poverty, and hard-working people. She pauses and tells me she remember so vividly when Hugo Chávez launched his presidential candidacy and said he was going take over and put *crazy glue* (pega loca) in all the padlocks and lower all the *santamarías* [roll-up doors in stores] in businesses and stores in the country. Georgina explains that this simple phrase gave her the chills and caused her a lot of anxiety because she grew up in a family based on the principle that one has to study to get ahead in life. Everything she had gained up to that moment was by her own merit, hard work, and a lot of savings to start up her own nursery, which after years became a school. She said that is the Venezuela where she comes from.

When Hugo Chávez won the presidency, many protests began to happen all over the country. At the time, Georgina's life partner was the president of the National Journalism Association (AVP for its Spanish acronym) and also a Vargas state native. Chávez' government actions against the press, domestic and international, are well-known and documented. He issued a law in 2010 to sanction critics of the regime, in the case of a contest that calls the lawfully established authority into doubt. As a result, arbitrary arrests and defamation charges have occurred. Meanwhile, the print medium is frequently threatened by inexplicable newsprint shortages (Reporters without borders, 2020).

Georgina and her partner were always in the fight for their rights. She began to

experience problems with her school renewal permits in the Department of Education. It always seemed there was some documentation missing or some other obstacle. She had to work hard to provide all the documents requested, so the department would have to give in and issue her permit. Georgina was certain this was done in retaliation.

In a turn of events, a national protest in many states against Chávez and his government became very violent. Police officers in full riot gear were deployed. Police officers fired volleys of tear gas and rubber bullets against the opposition protesters, and used a water cannon to hose them off their feet, without any prior warning.

Georgina and her partner were brutally beaten by police officers. They both ended up in the emergency room. One of Georgina's kidneys was too badly injured, so it needed to be surgically removed. A few months later, her partner, then husband passed away. Georgina felt broken and decided to get away from politics, from conflict, and dedicate some time to herself, to reevaluate her options, her situation, her priorities. She paused to tell me that I know very well how things were. I told her yes, I know, but pretend I don't and tell me in your own words. She agreed and said:

> The country did not change, Chávez was still ruling, I was all alone, working shoulder to shoulder with my school, with my profession, with my children, then well, I thought everyone got used to Chávez, everyone lived the same, you know. What was happening in Venezuela? You ask, the answer is nothing that prevented us from continuing living, we did not like the way things were but we continued living there.

In 2013, the country experienced many changes and the downward spiral also began. First major change, was Chávez died in March and Nicolás Maduro took over. Georgina clarifies that it is not that Chávez was better, he was a miserable tyrant, but Maduro is ten times worse. In December of the same year, Georgina resumed her fight as a member of the opposition again. Her problems with the permit renewals in state of Vargas' education zone continued.

In January 2014, following the murder of beloved beauty pageant turned actress, Mónica Spears and her husband, Venezuelans took it to the streets to protest against violence. In the months that follow, there were protests and anti-government demonstrations in every state, and the government security groups used excessive force on protesters, shot at groups of unarmed citizens, killing two students and one colectivo member. Members of the opposition were blamed for inciting violence and jailed for years, many remain in prison today, adding to the long list of political prisoners.

During these tumultuous and difficult times, Georgina managed to get her school operation permits renewed. However, she gets this worried look and puts her hand on her forehead, and declares: I made a big and costly mistake. I asked her, what she had done. She said:

> A manager that I had employed at my school asked me for a favor to please hire a cousin of his, that cousin turned out to be part of the Colectivos. She studied in the missions [missions are social programs implemented under Hugo Chávez' administration]. And then, I told him that hiring her could mean more problems for me because he knew, as well as I think the entire Vargas state, knew my political position but, he asked me to do it as a favor and the truth is the girl seemed super nice, with good presence, nothing to do with the Chavista profile, so I hired her.

A month later, on February 18th, opposition leader, Leopoldo López was blamed for triggering a week of turmoil. A judge ruled that there was enough evidence to hold him on charges that included arson and criminal incitement, which could result in up to 10 years imprisonment. He surrendered to authorities before thousands of cheering supporters, among them Georgina. His arrest affected many people, Georgina returned to her school the next day, feeling defeated.

To make matters worse, as soon as she arrived. A teacher informed her that the person she had hired had spent all day in the hallways, on the phone making demeaning comments

about Georgina and did not attend to the children. Georgina was infuriated and asked her to come into the office and told her that type of behavior would not be tolerated. She proceeded to file an administrative complaint with the pertaining educational authorities and the teacher was fired that very same day on the grounds of failing to fulfill her job functions.

One morning the situation turned critically dangerous for Georgina and her family. As every morning she followed the same routine, she would drop her daughter, a law student in her last semester, at the bus station and then Georgina would go on to her school. In her own words, this is what happened:

> My daughter was kidnapped while riding a bus to her university. In the name of God, she was never raped, nor did they hit her or anything like that, but there were many threats and also psychological abuse for her and for me. One of the things they said is that they were members of the Colectivo Chavista from Carayaca, the teacher I fired lived there, and she was a member also. They demanded that I had to reinstate her in her job and pay her wages retroactively. I had to pay her. From the first day they started talking to me I called the educational zone supervisor and I told him what was happening. He was also Chavista but he was somewhat more polite, you know, he was more polite. So, he says, let me handle him, I said no, we will deal with it together because she is my daughter, so the truth is that I think that because of his intervention, they gave me my daughter back. I was not able to file complaints at that time in fear of retaliation.

A few days after getting her daughter back, she filed charges with the police. The Colectivos called her again and threatened to kidnap her youngest child who was 10 years old then. They said they were watching him and described his routine; when and where he went to school, his extracurricular activities' schedule. Georgina was convinced immediately she and her family were under surveillance.

The only family member Georgina had in the U.S., was an uncle who is a commercial pilot and lives in Miami. Her uncle was always monitoring Georgina's situation, and after the kidnapping and the constant threats, he told her, he would make arrangements to get her out of

Venezuela, so she could clear her mind and put her thoughts in order.

Georgina accepted the offer and left for the U.S. Soon after her arrival, the Colectivos went to her home looking for her, and when they could not find her, raided her home and mistreated her children. At that moment, she said I have no option but to find a way to stay and gradually bring them [her children] from Venezuela. An acquaintance of hers, a Venezuelan man who had been in the U.S., for a while advised her on what to do and where to go to apply for asylum, then she could pursue a family reunification petition. That is exactly what she did.

Barriers

Referring to her concerns when she decided to request asylum, Georgina admits she experienced many emotions and the strongest one was fear, for her family's well-being first, about being in a country where she says 'everything looks the same, I never knew where I was'. Her second emotion was frustration about her lack of English language skills and sense of loss of her identity. She shared:

> Imagine I felt muted, voiceless, a language that I never spoke in my life, because I never liked it not even in high school. So, you know, I didn't even know how to say the basic things. Then, I had a great frustration because I learned something, very quickly and it is called humility. I have always considered myself humble, always, very humble, I think I was born to serve, In Venezuela, as I said, they [families] teach you to study, to progress, and a number of things, then here you lose your name, your identity, they never called me professor anymore. Here you realize that everything you bring is like as a chip in your memory, and it is precisely that chip that you need to remove to start over again.

Georgina compares her lived experience as being born again. New customs, new thoughts, new habits, a new language. She also defines Venezuelans as charismatic, affectionate and playful people and she sometimes felt a lack of cross-cultural competence. She would say things jokingly and people would take it the wrong way. She would have to apologize and restate what she really meant.

Interestingly, Georgina makes a connection between the frustration she experienced for her lack of what she calls cross-cultural competence and being humble. She met a Venezuelan woman who helped her find a job while she waited for her work permit. She started working without documents because she wanted to bring her family, and at the same time she needed to find a place, pay rent, pay the bills. Then, it hit her, Georgina, for the first time, understood the full extent of what the thousands of Colombians who migrated to Venezuela went through when they fled from the guerillas and economic downturn. She talks with a mixture of sadness and guilt, and said she never knew because, well, she was Venezuelan, she did not know all the hard work, or what it meant not to have 'papers'. She did not grasp the true meaning of the situation until she lived it herself.

After obtaining her work permit, she wanted to go back to education. In the meantime, she was taking the English courses the FDCF offered asylum seekers and refugees. Through the FDCF she enrolled in a 25-hour course and a second 40-hour course to obtain the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Georgina worked in day care for approximately two and half years. However, the outcome of her experience was unexpected, she shared:

> I told you before, I am a teacher by vocation and profession, and I did not like the educational experience in pre-school. Pre-school here is based on how much money you can get, so I did not want to do it anymore. The important thing here is what a child pays a week, that is what is important for the daycare owners.

Her negative perception discouraged her from having her credentials revalidated, which she claims it would have been easy for her to do, as she was able to obtain all her college official transcripts and training diplomas. Additionally, as a mother and a teacher, Georgina finds the American educational system confusing. She expresses with frustration that her 25-year-career, training and expertise are not taken into account or deemed valuable here.

Facilitators

Georgina met one of her neighbors, a woman originally from Ecuador and now a U.S citizen. They developed a cordial relationship, then one day Georgina saw her wearing scrubs and asked her what she did for a living. This woman explained she was a nursing assistant and this sparked Georgina's interest. Not wanting to continue or develop her education career, Georgina had already been thinking of making a career change. Taking the occupational training route seemed like a promising start. She asked her neighbor:

> And how do I study that? (laughs) I like it. I asked her how could I study that, and if I could study it in Spanish. She told me: Yes, you can, in Spanish, in French, in Creole, in everything (laughs) and she gave me her card, and the information. I found an institute nearby. I did it and well here I am a certified nursing assistant (CNA) by the Florida Department of Health, wanting to study nursing now and wanting to do other things too, may God give me the time, strength and funds to do it.

Georgina became very enthusiastic and hopeful about her career change. In addition to her nursing certification, she did the Cardiac Monitor Technician (CMT), Home Health Aide (HHA) and the Phlebotomy Technician (CPT) certifications. Currently, she works in both as HHA and as a nursing assistant. Georgina has tried to work as phlebotomist, but everywhere she has applied the employer requires previous experience, which she does not have.

As much as Georgina enjoys her new career, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted her psychological well-being. She often finds herself feeling anxious in the workplace. She mentioned it is scary not knowing how the virus could affect her condition of living with only one kidney. Overall, she thinks she is a reasonably good health, but there is always a doubt on her mind, as the virus is so new for the scientific and medical communities.

Final thoughts

In any circumstance in life people have to keep a positive can-do attitude and face things

and events as they come. Once you make a decision then move forward, because that is why I left Venezuela due to a very difficult and dangerous situation with my family. Once you are here seeking protection you have to give it your best. She concludes:

> I think you have to be optimistic; you have to be consistent; you have to be a fighter; you have to keep going. I always say God bless America, I bless this country, because it opens its doors for us and gave us a new opportunity to start over.

Corina Duran

Introduction

Corina Duran is a 37-year-old woman, from one of the western states in Venezuela and the richest in oil reserves in the country. She was born and raised in Maracaibo, the second most populated city. Corina is a very bubbly and outgoing person. She is married and has two children. As soon as we started talking, she was ready to tell me all about her story as an asylum seeker in the U.S.

Corina's story and education in Venezuela

Corina has an undergraduate degree in early childhood education and a master's degree in educational orientation. She worked in public schools and also had her own children's party entertainment company and was quite successful. She had her own apartment in a good neighborhood, her car, a stable job with all benefits, good income, but she opposed the government. She recalls:

> What happened was that when the government candidate won the state election that changed everything because I knew it was going to cause me a lot of problems. I was a member of the opposition, and with a Chavista (Chavez's regime supporter) governor in power, they are going to make our lives impossible. Above all, I did not want my son to grow up in that environment of threats and insecurity. But economically, I was in very good condition.

It took her only a few months to realize her worst fears. She uses the word *witch-hunt* to refer to the harassment and power abuse of the new incoming state governor and his staff. They

met with resistance from the opposition and in return they withheld paychecks, fire any dissenting workers from their jobs, and violently oppressed any peaceful protests. Corina's husband at the time and father of her oldest son, left Venezuela first and requested asylum in Miami. Even though they had separated prior to his departure, five months later she fled Venezuela with her son and asked her husband to add them to his asylum petition, he did.

Her major motivation for leaving everything behind and selling what she could, took her five months. She said once she makes a decision she never looks back. She affirms she did not consider going to another country, but the U.S., she stated:

> It was always the United States. Because I used to come here on vacation and I loved life here. I came on vacation and vacation life was beautiful, it is very different (laughs). Life on vacation was all about renting a car, going shopping, eating in nice restaurants, now when you come her to live here, things are very different.

Corina was very focused about the well-being of her son, who was 6 years old then. Even though she was used to vacationing in the U.S., she had realistic expectations about what her move to this country entailed. She knew she may have to start from zero, but she was convinced her decision was for the best, she was committed to succeeding although it was harder and took longer than she expected, she had a clear understanding of the asylum process:

> When you get here, you will be without papers for a while, so you have to work on whatever is available, on whatever you can get, not on your career.

Facilitators

When I asked her about her English language skills, she said she had an intermediate level and could make herself understood about 50% of the time. She took advantage of the FDCF's English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) program to improve her language skills. Once she started looking for a job, she got a waitress job in a Colombian restaurant where she learned the vocabulary of food, how to serve clients. Her next job was at the Ft. Lauderdale

airport, in a car rental company where she learned the language and expressions of that context.

During her third year in the U.S., she met her now second husband and the father of her second child. Her husband was a permanent resident and after they got married, she got her permanent residence and her ex-husband removed her from his asylum petition.

When she was pregnant with her second child, she took a child daycare course through the FDCF. She was interested in resuming her career in early childhood education, while at the same time, she had researched this field and knew the service was expensive. With a daughter on the way, and knowing that childcare workers receive a child allowance she focused on getting job ready before her daughter was born.

When her daughter was two months old, she began her job search and got a job at a daycare whose owners were originally from Venezuela. She worked in this daycare for 3 years and learned what she needed to move to re-taking her career. She noted:

> It is totally different, the children are the same everywhere but, the regulations in this country are very specific and very different from how I worked in Venezuela.

Next, she proceeded to get her transcripts translated. Fortunately, she had brought certified copies of all her documents. She asked peers and co-workers for information about the validation process. Luckily, one of the teacher's husband worked as a certified translator for a well-known, nationally recognized company specialized in translations and evaluations of foreign credentials and transcripts. He offered that if Corina hired him directly and not through the company, he could give her a special price, since the company takes a big portion of the translator fees, she agreed.

Once she received the certified translations, to have her credentials officially validated she had to submit the certified documents to the company for evaluation, including the full degree program. The company is Josef Silny & Associates, Inc., which assists international

students, and permanent residents who obtained degrees abroad, in foreign credential evaluation and translation to determine the U.S., foreign education equivalency (Josef Silny & Associates, n.d.).

Corina believes that when looking for a job, one has to let everyone know. This strategy proved to be effective as one of her previous co-workers contacted her about a job opening for a kindergarten teacher in the charter school where she worked and invited her to meet the school director. The interview went well and she got the job, for her experience and because she had the receipt as proof, she had indeed sent in all her credentials for validation and was waiting for the outcome. A few months later, Corina received a letter certifying the validity of her degree.

Corina explained that there are many types of certifications. The equivalency she obtained was for Pre-kindergarten, also called Pre-K or pre-school, a classroom-based preschool program for children up to four years old. She clarifies the following:

> I am a kindergarten teacher now but, they put me as an 'out of field' teacher, the certification covers me, because I have a certification but, not in the exact area. Here they are very picky about that, and they even inform the parents, they tell them she is going to teach this class but she is not certified for kindergarten, but for pre-K.

Corina felt confident about her ability to meet the demands of the position and offered to meet with parents if necessary. She mentioned that coincidentally, at the time of the interview, she was preparing to take the state examinations to be able to teach from kindergarten to third grade. Each examination costs about $150 but the state government decided to give them for free due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

To illustrate the importance of social connections, Corina told me about a fellow Venezuelan refugee who she had met in her hometown Maracaibo, and who was living in the same area. This person had kept in touch with Corina and had a daughter also the same age of Corina's second child. She advised her to do the child care training with the FDCF, but her

concern was that unlike Corina, she was not a teacher. Still Corina insisted it did not matter that she would learn. She did it and got a job, moved up until she became the daycare director.

Barriers

I asked Corina what challenges she believes other Venezuelan professionals may encounter and how they can prepare to face them and what can facilitate the process for them. She responded without hesitation that the major barrier or facilitator is in one word: expectations. She claims that the problem with many Venezuelans is having unrealistic expectations. Some seem to think they can just come and get a job on par with the position they held in Venezuela. Many Venezuelans come with money, but that is not enough, you have to invest time and effort to be able to work in your field. She explains her lived experience as follows:

> Although I knew that maybe I was going to have to start from zero. When I left it all behind, I knew it was going to be very good. Of course, one starts from the bottom and little by little, you grow and grow, and I feel very proud of what I have achieved in these seven years. Everything with a lot of effort, and there were difficult moments when you don't see the way out, but little by little one has to go through those processes so that you learn to value what you have. Always with a futuristic view and focus, I did not stay there, I am a teacher and have gradually climbed up.

On the contrary, she affirms people who come with realistic expectations, humility and determination are more likely to do well in the American culture overall. She indicated being resilient in terms of resistance, flexibility and endurance puts you in the right mindset to overcome obstacles. If one becomes impatient or discouraged the road to travel will be much more difficult. She has encountered many Venezuelan refugees professionals who are brilliant and could have had a great career but gave up their aspirations too soon. Persistence is key.

Corina also thinks a barrier for incoming refugees is that they have to grab any job they can to pay the bills, to pay rent so the focus shifts to survival mode instead of how to grow professionally. Furthermore, she posits that as times passes it becomes harder for refugees to get

out of their comfort zone. She, on the contrary has no issues moving out of her comfort zone and do what she needs to do to move ahead, she views her efforts in time and money as an investment in her future, in the achievement of her professional goals.

Final thoughts

Her last reflection and advice for other refugees, especially her fellow Venezuelans, many of whom, like herself, were used to coming to the U.S., on vacation or shopping trips, is to realize this is not a vacation. She reminisces and reflects:

> We all start from the bottom. I started going to places on foot, I took my son to school by bus, well, I spent six months taking him by bus. When it rained, we got soaking wet and we had our "crocs" to walk in the pouring rain so when we got to school, I would dry his feet, put on his socks and shoes and off he went. Coming from Venezuela, I had my great car and comfort, I had another status. Because back in Maracaibo, I would never take a bus, it was unthinkable, but here I had to. It makes me proud; I went up little by little and that is valuable. There are people who are going through that right now, I tell them keep calm, this shall pass, and they will have many stories to tell in the future. This is how we all start off. Little by little things happen. I have very good Venezuelan friends that I met here also and from other nationalities, I am lucky to have a very good network of friends who have given me a hand when I needed it. That's the truth and I thank God.

Corina has made many friends from different nationalities in the seven years she has been in the U.S., her outgoing and extrovert personality makes it easier for her to establish personal connections. She noted that she is not afraid to ask all sorts of questions. She dismisses answers that are self-defeating or pessimistic. She continues her inquiry until she finds people who have done it and asks them to tell her what they did and how they did it. Throughout all the interview she referred to the importance of her social network in her achievements.

Isabel Jimenez

Introduction

Isabel is a 34-year-old woman, married and mother of a 3-year-old girl. She was born and raised in Venezuela in the western state of Lara. Her parents are both physicians. She has a sister

who is a dermatologist and also lives in Miami.

Isabel's story and education in Venezuela

Isabel graduated in veterinary medicine in 2009. She worked while she studied and exceled in the pathological anatomy field. Upon graduation, she was hired to teach pathology at the university, where she worked until she came to the U.S.

Isabel was very involved with the opposition during her time as a student and later as a professor. She noted that students were increasingly at the forefront of the political struggle over economic and social conditions in Venezuela, both on campus and across the country. As an active participant in the student protests, she explains they often met with violent retaliation by state security forces, resulting in deaths and injuries from bullets, rubber bullets, shotgun pellets, police water cannons, and tear gas.

As a result of Isabel's involvement in candidate Henrique Capriles' presidential campaign against Maduro, she knew she was being closely watched. For instance, her mobile phone was tapped and even though she was not directly targeted, pro-governments students told her she needed to watch out for herself and her possessions, as a way to intimidate her.

Isabel talks about teaching with passion but, at the same time, she recalls her daily struggles and how stressful it was. She said:

> Well, as you know, all the areas in Venezuela; the economy, the social deterioration were getting really bad. I, as a university professor, had a very low salary, about $13 a month. I could barely make ends meet. I often had to call my parents to ask them for help to pay my bills. It was impossible for me to support myself with that salary. Don't get me wrong I really love teaching, as a matter of fact, I would love to go back and teach in a university setting.

At the time, Isabel's boyfriend had grown tired of all the turmoil and decided to migrate to the U.S. He asked her to go to visit him and suggested it would be beneficial for her to get

away, unwind and clear her head. She did and he proposed to her, Isabel went back to Venezuela to make arrangements, get her paperwork in order and a year later they got married.

When I asked her if they had applied for asylum, she said her boyfriend is originally from Cuba so, they used the Cuban Adjustment Law to gain lawful presence in the U.S. Still, she had to wait for a year and one day to get her work permit.

Isabel explains why she made the decision to leave and how she was feeling at that moment. She claims there were many more push than pull factors.

> Until the end, I fought for Venezuela. I was like the proverb we use; there is no evil that can last 100 years or a body capable to endure it. I had lots of faith. I mean, it's my homeland where I have all my family, but it was really rough. At the time, I always thought if I leave it would be to do a Master's degree, or a doctorate as other of my colleagues did, but always with the idea of returning to Venezuela. However, the situation got worse and I started feeling very lonely and insecure. Things were getting very tough and I was about to reach my breaking point.

Isabel was feeling optimistic about her future in the U.S. Not only was she familiar with and liked the U.S. but, after her high school graduation, Isabel went to Boston, Massachusetts to study English for 5 months. Although, she believed she was not as fluent as back then, at least, she had a solid foundation of the language. She believed it was a matter of time and practice before she could regain her English language fluency.

Barriers

When we talked about barriers for refugees in general, her first reaction was to say acquiring the language. Isabel elaborates and points out that for refugees and asylum seekers with none or limited language skills is a major challenge to learn English, considering that when they first arrive their main focus is on surviving and making ends meet. It is not impossible but, requires much work and dedication. She adds

> In the case of Venezuelans, we may be excellent and knowledgeable professionals but, in Spanish so, that's an immediate barrier that we need to surmount to be productive.

After waiting for a year to get her work permit, Isabel was excited to start her job search. She had searched for information about the possibility to use her professional credentials, only to find out the process for revalidation was lengthy and costly for veterinarians with a foreign degree. However, Isabel knew she wanted to work in veterinary, she found out there was some sort of recognition of her credentials. She could present her credentials to a potential employer but, she would only be able to work as a veterinary technical assistant or veterinary technician position with a minimum wage salary. At first, she hesitated about this option, she recalls:

> I was ready to go to work in any occupation. It's like you don't know what to expect or you have certain expectations but you don't know how it's going to come about but, I was ready to work in any job I could get. I think the problem is that sometimes you think at home, I was a university professor, I had certain status and you have to take that idea out of your head and be clear that you may end up doing a job that it's not according to your credentials and experience.

In her opinion, it is more practical and beneficial for Venezuelan refugees to stop thinking about what they used to be or used to have. It is the past; it is gone and one needs to embrace the new reality, make the best of it to adapt and integrate.

In the same vein, Isabel posits that adaptation and integration mean different things for different people. Isabel contacted one of her university professors, who she found out was also living in South Florida and the first thing he told Isabel was that he was working at Uber, was making good money and seemed content with his new life. Isabel was saddened because he was a brilliant professor in microbiology, well-known and respected in the academic community, and his talent was gone to waste.

Isabel made a very important point about her professor's case. She noted that if there were alternate evaluation methodologies for foreign credentials and experience, such as interviews or assessments for refugee professionals, there was no doubt in her mind, her

professor would have passed them without a problem and his talent would have been put to good use in an academic or research position.

Isabel also thinks the age at which one migrates can be a barrier or a facilitator. She, for instance, arrived in the U.S., at age 29 and is now 34, she believes this helps because she has more time to pursue her goals than someone who arrives at age 50 and above.

Facilitators

When Isabel made up her mind about job searching in profession, she was not sure where to start. She contacted a Venezuelan friend who had been living in Florida longer that she had, and asked her for help. Isabel's friend had experience applying for jobs online and preparing resumes. One Friday, Isabel applied to 3 positions on the job search website Indeed. To her surprise, she received a phone call from a new animal hospital's recruiter the following Monday requesting an interview with her. Isabel met with the doctor in charge and with the owner, who conducted the interview in English and since the hospital was still under construction, when it was finished two months later, Isabel was hired.

One of the critical aspects of the job was the Isabel was bilingual. She claims bilingual personnel are in high demand in Florida. Speaking English and Spanish is highly important for many positions. This is how Isabel describes her first work experience as a veterinary technical assistant.

> I spent most of my time at the front desk specially since a lot of people called asking for somebody who spoke Spanish. Many of the clients were Spanish-speaking so I was able to translate for the doctors and back to the clients. One of the most satisfying aspect of the job was the fact that not only was I able to translate for the doctors and for the clients but also, I had the veterinary knowledge to provide valuable input to both parties. I felt useful, enjoyed and appreciated that aspect of the job. The doctor, for example, would ask me to explain the results of an x-ray to the client about at cardiac silhouette and I could easily do that as a doctor. The clients were very happy with my assistance and so were the doctor and owner.

Isabel adds that one important facilitator for her family was the Florida Department of Children and Families' WIC program. She explains that her husband's salary and hers combined still put them in the low-income status. With the birth of her first child, they struggled to provide for her. It was through her in-laws she found out about WIC, which stands for Women, Infants and Children; a nutrition program for expecting mothers of low-income families. She received a groceries debit card to purchase healthy foods, and milk which was really helpful. Isabel also joined a program called Healthy Start, where they help expecting mothers develop healthy habits during pregnancy. She also took advantage of their counseling services when she experienced post-partum depression. With their help, Isabel found the strength to move forward.

Final thoughts

Isabel contends that having the right mindset is fundamental for achieving goals. As an illustration, she tells me an anecdote.

You know once, I went to a doctor's appointment and when he was filling out my history, he asked me what my occupation was and, I said, I used to be a veterinary doctor in Venezuela. He paused and said you will always be a veterinary doctor, no matter what.

Isabel said it was a wake-up call for her. She began to realize that sometimes because of the situation she was in, she had begun to belittle herself. She realized she could not allow mental limitations to set in. She had many blessings in her life, including working in her profession, seeing cases with the doctors, talking to clients, helping them out and learning every day. She felt useful and valued. Isabel is optimistic about getting licensed in Florida.

Karina Leon

Introduction

Karina is a 55-year-old woman born and raised in Caracas, Venezuela. She is the oldest

of four siblings, her youngest sister also lives in Miami and migrated before her. Her mother died at a young age when Karina was a child. Karina is very studious and a believer in life-long learning as evidenced in her story.

Karina's story and education in Venezuela

Karina graduated in veterinary medicine in 1990 from the Central University of Venezuela. After graduation, Karina got a job in Mérida (a state in the northwest). She worked with dairy cattle for about 3 years. Next, she went to work with a manufacturing company of veterinary pharmaceutical products as a technical consultant. At the same time, she had her private veterinary practice.

A few years later, Karina went to work for another pharmaceutical company mainly focused on poultry and swine medicine. The same company later hired her for the human medicine department as medical sales representative. The company had both divisions, veterinary medicine and human medicine. She received intensive training and enjoyed her work and the vast learning experience she acquired. She worked in this company for 7 years. Karina accumulated about 10 years of experience. She worked in farms, ranches, private practice, veterinary medicine, and human medicine.

When her youngest sister moved to Miami, Karina went to visit her and met an American man. Soon, they started long-distance dating. He traveled a few times to visit her in Venezuela. In 1999, Chavez became president, Karina comments she decided to leave because of the widespread fear about Chavez and his socialist project. That is what really got her worried. She packed up and left for Miami. Having her sister in Miami also encouraged her.

Barriers

Karina pointed out that in 1999, Venezuelans were not migrating here like they are now.

She was certain she did not want to come here as an immigrant to work in anything to survive. She wanted to continue with her profession in veterinary medicine. She had a good socio-economic status in Venezuela at the time and, did not want to lose it all. However, the reality in which she found herself did not meet her expectations.

When Karina arrived in the U.S., her English skills were at the beginner's level. She was aware that this was the greatest barrier she would have to surmount. She describes her experience:

> I was anxious about my lack of English language skills. I knew some English because of my American boyfriend. I mean, I could get by but, I couldn't speak it or write it like I write today, for example. Therefore, the first thing I did when I arrived was to register for an English course that was offered for free at a local high school nearby. I soon realized that I was not learning much so, I registered at a college instead to learn more and better.

One day, Karina saw a job ad on a newspaper for an assistant in an animal shelter. She called and went for an interview. She thought the job was to help take care of the animals, but it was for cleaning cages. She never told them about her veterinary degree though, when I asked her why that was, she said she was sort of embarrassed and, in the beginning, she hardly if ever, told people about her professional credentials. She quit the job a month later.

When we were talking about barriers, Karina, the participant who has been living in the U.S., the longest, 21 years to be exact, brought up some important points:

> The competition here is tough. There are a lot of foreign professionals sometimes less prepared than you, sometimes better prepared than you or with more credentials and qualifications than you. So, you need to bring an added value others don't have. You need to compete on every level. Before anything, you must learn the language. If you want to succeed and learn about the culture, you must acquire the language, there's no other way. Venezuelans who are planning to come here have to understand that if they had a high status, or a top position in a company, they cannot expect to come here and get the same position. That's not realistic. They have to be humble. We still have that rich country mentality that does not exist anymore that's what I mean by being humble.

Facilitators

A few months after her arrival in the U.S., Karina and her fiancé got married and started the permanent residence process. Becoming a permanent resident helped her get financial aid for her English courses and later for an associate degree. In the meantime, Karina met a peer who had studied with her at the university and, who was working as a veterinary technician at a local animal hospital. He recommended her with management and she got a part-time job. Karina could not work full-time because she had just started attending college for her veterinary technical assistant associate degree which took her three years to complete.

> I had a problem with the owner he didn't treat me correctly and I had to quit a year later. I had other jobs at various animal clinics and hospitals but, I was never 100% comfortable. It was like I had not found the right place for me. And then I got a job at PetSmart, in the grooming department. I made much more money there, plus I got excellent tips from customers. Surprisingly, I really enjoyed that job. I worked at PetSmart for four years.

One of Karina's professors at the college, contacted her about a vacancy at a research facility nearby specializing in monkeys. Even though, she had no experience with monkeys, she found the opportunity very appealing. When she called to inquire about the position, the person who answered the phone had studied with her in Venezuela. They had been in touch when she first arrived but, he had moved to Georgia and she had not heard from him since. With his recommendation, Karina got a position as a nonhuman primates research intern. She recounts:

> My internship lasted one year and, after that, they hired permanently and that's when my career really took off. They knew I had a degree in veterinary medicine from Venezuela and that I also had an associate degree. They hired me as a veterinary doctor, because in research you don't need to have a license to work. My research work at the center was incredibly rewarding, so much so, that I worked in the center for 15 years.

During those 15 years, Karina received constant training. She was always learning, trying to keep current, because she found out research was her true passion. Karina was promoted to operations manager, then to operations director, then to head of the occupational health and

safety. She was also a member of the IACUC. Due to her husband's failing health and the pandemic, she quit her job in March 2020. When I asked her what IACUC was, she said it is the Institutional Animal Care & Use Committee, the equivalent of an IRB in universities. Karina enjoyed this aspect of the job because it deals with animal welfare.

As the life-long learner she is, Karina also started a master's degree in clinical research organization and management about two years ago. She is interested in doing pre-clinical studies with scientists and doctors who work with monkeys before releasing drugs or treatments to humans. Like many other Venezuelan veterinarians, she is preparing for state licensure, which I will address in the analysis section.

Final thoughts

When we were wrapping up the interview Karina wanted to share one advice for Venezuelans planning or considering fleeing to the U.S. She emphasized that although it may sound common sense, she thinks sometimes Venezuelans may forget it because here things move at a slower pace. They need to bear in mind this is not Venezuela, it is the United States. A country with its own laws and norms, which they must respect if they wish to work, progress and live in this society.

Mercedes Navas

Introduction

Mercedes is a 42-year-old married woman and mother of two children. She was born and raised in Maracay Aragua state, located in the north-central region of Venezuela. Mercedes never planned or thought about leaving Venezuela until a series of violent events pushed her and her family to flee in search of protection.

Mercedes' story and education in Venezuela

Mercedes graduated with a degree in Veterinary Medicine from Central University of Venezuela (UCV) in 2005. She worked with a professor in a private diagnostic veterinary lab as an intern from the 3rd year of her studies and continued after graduation. Next, she was offered another job at a large pig farm. Mercedes asserts the problem with that job was that back in 2005, it was uncommon for a woman to be working in this type of farms supervising many male workers. She had to deal with gender issues. After 2 years, she quit and got a job at a company that sold veterinary meds to farms, as a sales representative.

Mercedes' job in sales required extensive traveling as she had responsibility for the central and western states of the country, she felt exhausted. She got a job offer from the Venezuelan Institute of Rural Development, which she accepted, because of the impact it would have on the rural communities. The institute was responsible for coordinating and executing public policies for land sanitation, promoting the construction of infrastructure works for irrigated lands, promoting technical training for inhabitants of the rural sector.

The job was gratifying for Mercedes until they were assigned to work with Cuban doctors as part of Chavez' socialist project and things changed for the worse. As a member of the opposition Mercedes just could not continue to work for a project that goes against her democratic values.

Her next job was at Quimbiotec one of the companies of the IVIC (Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research). Quimbiotec was a non-profit state company, under the Ministry of Popular Power for Health. It was a blood derivatives production plant and, the only one of its kind in the country. It produced and marketed high-quality blood derivatives, as well as recombinant drugs, antivenom and anti-scorpion drugs. Mercedes worked in this company for 11

years until she and her family left Venezuela.

The situation that pushed Mercedes and family to seek protection was that her father-in-law was in the military and had some influence in Aragua state where they lived. He was in the opposition and Mercedes, her husband and other family members would often accompany him to events and protests to support his cause against the government's oppression. Mercedes explains the minister of health, for instance, was surrounded by people who threatened and intimidated those who were not in favor of the government. Many members of her family fiercely opposed to the government and they became a target of the regime.

One night, at about 10:30 pm while sleeping, suddenly, Mercedes' husband was awakened by a loud noise in the house. His first thought was that one of the children was in the kitchen. When he opened the door to go downstairs, four armed men entered. They violently tied them up and kept them in their bedroom for hours, while searching for something around the house.

The men demanded money, US dollars and, made sure Mercedes and her husband knew they had information about their daily activities. They knew the children's names, the school they attended, when they had traveled abroad, as a way to intimidate them and let them know they were being closely watched at all times. Mercedes recalls:

> Those were the darkest hours of my life. I could not see my children; thank God they were sleeping and did not know what was going on. The other point is that I had to calm my husband down, he was getting nervous and aggressive. He was challenging these people and I told him please calm down and to remember the children were in the room next-door. When I said that he calmed down. As I told you earlier, they knew our routine; when we left for work, when I took the children to school, when I went to the bank, where I worked, who my supervisor was, I mean they knew everything. I was so mortified; I ask myself what is this? How come they have so much information? The more I thought about it I was in denial, I said to myself this is not possible, this is a nightmare, this is not happening.

The men threatened to come back until they found what they were looking for. Nevertheless, they took everything they could. They also stole Mercedes' car. Before leaving, they said they were forgiving her husband and children's lives this time because they had been cooperative but, that regardless, they would come back and they would have to pay for the *vaccine* (term used by irregular armed groups as extorsion to families, merchants and farmers). Mercedes and her husband filed an extensive report with the police.

At first, Mercedes told her husband they could move to Chile, Peru, or anywhere. He was reluctant to leave but, she felt she could no longer live in so much fear. She pleaded to her husband that she wanted him and their kids alive and, to live a normal life. She remembers he finally gave in, they sold what they could and left Venezuela.

Barriers

Mercedes and her family arrived in the U.S., in 2017. Her younger brother was already an asylum seeker living in Miami and, Mercedes and her family stayed with him while they resettled and introduced their asylum petition to the immigration authorities.

Mercedes met a peer who had studied with her in Venezuela and asked her what were the possibilities to work in their field and she said it was very difficult. She added she wanted to introduce Mercedes to her boss who was from Colombia and had followed all the steps to validate his degree.

In the meeting, the veterinarian from Colombia explained the whole process to Mercedes; what subjects she needed to study in school to start the credential validation process. Depending on what the degree evaluation results were, there were certain tests she needed to take as well. According to the Colombian veterinarian the amount of money it would take for Mercedes to complete the process added up to between $50,000 to $60,000, not to mention the length of time,

effort and preparation. He mentioned he had applied and received student loans and encouraged her to do the same. Mercedes was discouraged and disheartened as they could barely make ends meet to provide for her children. The amount of money she needed was not a viable option.

Mercedes had no English language skills for which she faced many hurdles. It became a problem when she was interviewing for jobs. Being in South Florida where so many people speak Spanish makes it easier to manage than in other states but, it is still not enough for good job opportunities She explains:

> I worked in a restaurant but, definitely the language barrier was a big problem for me to find more suitable job opportunities. It is also true that being in South Florida where so many people speak Spanish makes it easier to manage than in other states. Definitely the language barrier affected me. I tried to get a job in a veterinary clinic but I soon as they knew I didn't speak the language, they turned me down. I had no choice but to search for jobs in restaurants or as a manicurist, which was my first job.

Getting suitable and affordable childcare was challenging. Mercedes and her husband worked from Monday to Saturdays. They managed to care for their children during the week. Finding someone to care for their children on Saturdays was a problem.

> We had problems getting care for the children while we were at work. I couldn't afford a babysitter on Saturdays because they would charge me more than I was going to make that day. At first, I asked some friends to help me take care of the children on Saturdays but, I couldn't ask them to do it every Saturday.

Facilitators

One day when Mercedes was having ice cream with her two children, she saw an ad across the street in a daycare for an assistant. Mercedes had a feeling this may be the break she needed. She talked to the director, she said they needed a substitute for an assistant who was on maternity leave. The director liked Mercedes, hired her and provided the state mandated training as well as the in-house training. Mercedes really enjoyed working with children with disabilities,

children with autism. This job solved the Saturday childcare problem for her family. She worked there for 2 years. She left due to Covid-19 as the daycare closed.

Mercedes needed to find another job, preferably in her profession, which she said she missed many times during the interview. She prepared her resume and removed the daycare center experience and only included her qualifications and experience as a veterinary doctor. She applied to five jobs and got a call from three. She did well on all the interviews but, in the first two the problem was her English skills. However, the owner of a clinic in Boca Raton, a Brazilian veterinarian, interviewed her and offered her a job as a veterinary technician and she started on August 3rd, 2020.

Final thoughts

When I asked Mercedes about a final thought and/or reflection for other Venezuelan professionals who may consider migrating to the U.S., this is what she said:

> I have repeated it to myself many times you should never forget who you are while you travel the path of who you are not. You have to start with a blank slate but, you are a professional with experience, who studied and dedicated years to getting an education. I am very grateful to the U.S. I think it all boils down to humbleness and attitude. An attitude of helping others whenever you can. From the moment you set foot on this country, you need to be clear that your past and your status no longer hold true. I am so grateful to everybody who has given me an opportunity to work when I don't even speak the language well, for me that's priceless.

One of Mercedes' colleagues from Venezuela called her to let her know that she had received a call from another colleague who had also fled Venezuela and was living in Fort Lauderdale, wanting to invite them over for dinner. That was the moment Mercedes found out for the first time what a group of Venezuelan veterinarian doctors were trying to do for their colleagues and compatriots in the U.S., and the licensure process, which I will address in more detail later in this chapter.

Olga Parra

Introduction

Olga is a 37-year-old woman from Maracaibo; the capital city of Zulia state in northwestern Venezuela and the second largest city in the country.

Olga's story and education in Venezuela

Olga left Venezuela after she had graduated in veterinary medicine and had been working for 7 years in a private clinic. She was the veterinary doctor in charge. She also did a specialization in surgery a year after graduation. As soon as she finished her internship, the clinic hired her and she worked there for seven years nonstop until she left the country.

Olga made the decision to leave because of the rampant insecurity. She had a stable job and she earned very good money. In fact, she claims she was one of the highest paid veterinary doctors in the city.

About the economy and insecurity, she commented:

> The economy was in very bad shape. If you wanted to buy a new car and you had the money you couldn't because cars were no longer being manufactured in the country or even imported. Buying a home was almost impossible. Then, if you wanted to buy food no matter how much money you had you couldn't find any food, in the few places that had food, you had to stand in line for hours and hours to be able to buy some. There was no price control, these markets would sell food at prices not everybody could afford. I began to feel desperate. In my work sometimes we had to do shifts at night and on weekends, and I can say that almost every weekend we got robbed at gun point. I began to feel desperate.

As a result, Olga was fed up and began to get involved in politics with the opposition. She began to partner with public figures of the opposition and was beginning to have more exposure to the general population, which put her in a problematic situation.

She emphasized, she protested because of her conviction they could overthrow the oppressive socialist regime. As time and protests went on, she began to feel overwhelmed and

decided to take vacation time in the US, as she had many times before. While on vacation, the Venezuelan government issued a new decree which stated people who spent too much time abroad and, especially in the United States, could be declared national traitors. Not only that but, since there were foreign exchange controls in place, upon returning, people could be detained and, their money seized by the immigration authorities.

The oppression and persecution continued with the government using a list of names, fingerprints and national identification numbers of people in the opposition who had signed a referendum to recall against Chavez back in 2004. Those whose names appeared on the list faced reprisal and were barred from working in the public sector. Olga was confident that her name had been added to the list. Although the administration professed to be committed to political inclusivity, it openly discriminated against anyone who did not share its viewpoints (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

What prompted Olga to consult with an immigration lawyer while in the U.S., was due to the information she was getting from Venezuela. She stated:

> I got some news from people in Maracaibo, immigration authorities were making arrests at the airport. I was really terrified I didn't want to take the risk of getting arrested upon my return.

The immigration lawyer gave Olga a few possible options and given the situation, the best one was to apply for political asylum right then. Olga submitted her petition and did not return to Venezuela.

Barriers

When I asked Olga if there were any job opportunities for her to use her professional credentials and experience, this was her answer:

> Zero. When you first arrive in this country the first thing to do is to settle to establish yourself. As I told you before, I didn't have a great amount of money and I had no

> properties, what I left back in Venezuela were minor things. I had my family sell them for me, exchange the money into US dollars and wired the money to me but, the amount was minimal. So, the first two years were mainly dedicated to settling down and surviving to make enough money to pay my bills and learning how things work here. I worked for 3 years for a company in kitchenware sales. Always keeping the goal on my mind to save as much as I could to collect the amount needed to revalidate my credentials.

Olga has never lost hope to one day she will be able to practice her profession. She says she does not see herself doing anything else. The fact that 5 years have already passed seemed too long for her career development goals in the U.S.

One of the most difficult barriers for Olga was waiting more than six months to get her work permit. Nevertheless, two years after getting her work permit, Olga and her partner decided to open a small business distributing disposable products for restaurants in the area. It went well for a while but, as the business grew, they needed more capital to compete in the market and eventually had to close it down.

Olga observed what makes it more challenging for professionals from other countries is the lack of information. She noted:

> There is not an entity, an office that can guide you, depending on your profession, on what you need to do or where you need to go to get resources or help. You have to rely on your social networks to get information which sometimes may not the most accurate.

Facilitators

One of the greatest facilitators for Olga was having her best friend already living in Miami when she came on vacation and decided to stay and request political asylum. It was her friend who recommended Olga to her manager for a job selling kitchenware. Olga explains:

> It took months to get my work permit, and in the meantime, I had to work like everybody else. The company assigned me a tax number and since I did direct sales I was paid on commission and they (immigration/tax authorities) couldn't find out. When I arrived, I stayed at her house (best friend's house), we worked in the company together all that time. She told me I could work there until I could become independent enough to pursue my goal to get certified as a veterinary doctor in this country.

Olga acknowledges her friend's help was invaluable and she believes it would have been twice as hard to survive without her help. Her best friend welcomed Olga into her home, helped her get a job, guided and supported her until she was able to make a living on her own.

Another major facilitator was that Olga had advanced English language skills when she arrived in the U.S. She proudly talks about her important achievement:

> I studied English in Venezuela on my own and actually when I came to the US, I had a good level of English skills. Actually, an immigration officer from Canada interviewed me in English for a work petition and I passed. I could write and read very well, I only had to work on my fluency, which you can get once you start practicing it every day. I learned it on my own because I had always had an obsession to learn it.

The U.S., was not Olga's first country choice to migrate. She had attempted to migrate to Australia where the most common way to obtain a permanent residence permit is through professions in high demand or with a shortage of skilled workers in the country. Unfortunately, veterinary medicine was not on these lists and Olga did not get it.

In her next attempt, Olga applied for permanent residence in Canada, passed the English proficiency test, but needed between 10,000 to 12,000 USD in her bank account which she did not have so, it did not work either. Nevertheless, she is proud for having learned English on her own because it helped her get her first job in direct sales, as writing, speaking and reading in English was a job requirement.

Final thoughts

In wrapping up the interview Olga offered some thoughts and reflections. Olga stressed the importance of learning the language which requires persistence, time, effort and sometime sacrifices. She recognizes it is easier said than done when you are focused on surviving economically and even more difficult when you have children. She suggested studying English 2 to 3 hours a day as a reasonable and achievable goal.

Olga underlines the importance of studies such as this and remains hopeful it will reach many policymakers. She reflects:

> Sometimes I think the government in this country is unaware of that impact foreign professionals could have on the economy if there were facilitative processes in place. I know so many professionals who are working I don't know for $10 or $12 an hour and who could be working in their professions making much more money, paying more taxes, I mean the impact would be huge.

Almost all participants shared a similar point of view about the wasted talent and opportunities for so many foreign professionals to contribute to the economy of the U.S.

Rosario Tovar

Introduction

Rosario is a friendly, single 34-year-old woman, from the western state Mérida. As soon as the interview started, she eagerly inquired about the study and how hopeful she was her story might positively impact other Venezuelan refugee professionals. She seemed comfortable and willing to talk about home, career, and her professional experience.

Rosario's story and education in Venezuela

Rosario graduated in 2009 as a Veterinary doctor, at the Lisandro Alvarado University (UCLA) in Venezuela. Since 2007 she has been working and gaining experience in different small animal clinics. In 2012, Rosario decided to leave Venezuela for Spain initially to do an internship which, then turned into a master's degree. This is how her international trajectory began. She acknowledges she was not in direct confrontation with the government however, living conditions and insecurity were really getting difficult to deal with on a daily basis.

The government's foreign currency exchange control made it arduous to get US dollars or euros for her to be able to go to Spain. It was also challenging to get her papers certified and legalized. She had saved enough money to be able to support herself in Spain but, after she

arrived in Spain, the government changed the rules and prevented her from getting her money exchanged into euros. She recalls:

> So, there I was in Spain with only €400 in my pocket and a debt of €2000 to the university for tuition. I had left a power of attorney to my mom and sisters to help me process the conversion of my money to euros through the established process with the government. Since I was a student and I had to justify for what purpose I needed the money, the university issued a letter with a breakdown of all the expenses, tuition and estimated living expenses (room & board), which I submitted. Unfortunately, the government only approved my tuition expenses but, not my living expenses. I found myself in a desperate situation, I had to work day and night to be able to support myself.

Rosario did not give up in the face of adversity. She developed her own thesis project, defended it and obtained her master degree in Small Animals at the University of las Palmas de Gran Canarias in Spain; her work was focused on anesthesia and pain management. Faculty were impressed with Rosario's work and offered her a paid internship at the university's hospital. She was trained in different areas of medicine, mainly in emergencies and intensive care, with special focus on the field of veterinary oncology services.

Rosario received various job offers in Spain but, she needed a work visa which she would have to get in the embassy of Spain in Venezuela. She explained the possibilities of getting the work permit in a reasonable time were slim to none. Second, there was no guarantee she would be able to leave the country again with all the roadblocks imposed by the regime. Rosario's advisor was concerned about situation and asked her for her updated resumé so he could share it with some colleagues in the Middle East. She remembers what she thought about his proposition:

> My advisor asked me for my resumé and told me he had some contacts in the Middle East, in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and that he would try to get me a job. They were always looking for veterinary doctors and he believed I was very competent and could do it. My first reaction was to tell him why he was going to send me to such faraway places when I don't speak English much less Arabic. He told me not to worry and just give him my resumé. Incredibly, one week later, I received a call from the owner of one clinic is Saudi Arabia.

The clinic owner interviewed her but, given her lack of English language skills, he proposed that she took an immersive English course for three months and to contact him again when she was ready. Rosario agreed finished her course and two weeks later was on her way to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She describes her experience:

> I got a two-year contract in Saudi Arabia and, it was radical change for me but, one of the best experiences of my life. It opened my mind to a new world and a culture that not too many people have the chance to get to know. I became more humane and understanding, of the culture and even of politics because it's a monarchy. I got to hear the women's voices that although women have to wear an *abaya* in public, including me, women there, are much stronger than people in western cultures think.

At the end of her contract Rosario went back to Spain and began to make contacts in various universities in the United States. The first one she contacted was the University of Colorado. She sent them her resume and what she had done in Venezuela, Spain, and Saudi Arabia. Rosario had had the chance to work with American veterinarians and was always impressed with their knowledge and professionalism. She asked her colleagues in Colorado if she could do an internship at the university and they accepted her.

Barriers

Rosario moved to Colorado and worked in different areas of veterinary medicine. Her colleagues were very supportive. They motivated her to grow. She wanted to stay and work in her profession. She entered the U.S. with a tourist visa and, even though the university accepted her to do an unpaid internship, as time went by, she knew she had to make the effort to change her immigration status and be allowed to stay legally.

Rosario faced another problem; her passport was to expire in 6 months. She requested an extension but received no response. It is amply documented when it comes to obtaining this document Venezuelans face several challenges. Some people must wait months, if not years, to obtain a passport. The procedure can be time-consuming, costly, and even unlawful when corrupt

government agents charge triple the official amount to expedite the process.

The government has actually shown trends of politicization of migration services in the past. Many opposition leaders and public figures have confirmed their passports have been confiscated or their migration procedures have been canceled. This indicates that the government of Maduro is trying to restrict the right of Venezuelan citizens to freedom of movement by hindering access to travel documents. Some have suggested that immigration enforcement is being used as an excuse to take advantage of political intimidation.

Given that her passport expiration date was soon approaching, Rosario's lawyer advised her to apply for asylum to buy some more time. She did and a few months later had the interview with an immigration officer. Rosario presented her case and the officer concluded that she did not have enough grounds for her to be considered a victim of political persecution, but granted her a one-year extension to stay and procure an alternate change of immigration status.

Facilitators

In June 2019, the National Assembly of Venezuela under interim president Juan Guaidó issued a decree extending the passport validity for five more years after the expiration date. On June 7, 2019 the United States Department of State (2019) recognized this extension of passport validity for visa issuance and other consular purposes. Customs and Border Protection also recognized the passports covered by this decree. The announcement by the State Department is good news for Venezuelan citizens, who continue to face long delays and other difficulties in renewing passports due to instability in the country. The U.S. Department of State's media note released states the following:

> Venezuelan passport holders who have been issued a passport extension will have the validity period extended by five years from the expiration date in their passport and valid for admission to the United States, as long as the traveler is otherwise admissible. Venezuelans in the United States holding passports extended by the decree may use those

> passports, which will still be considered valid in accordance with the decree, for any appropriate consular purpose. Nothing in this action alters the requirements for obtaining a U.S. visa or for admission to the United States. (U.S. Department of State, 2019, para. 2).

Rosario took advantage of the extension the officer granted as well as the Department of State's acceptance and support of the Venezuelan passports extension decree. She arranged to attend the Veterinary Meeting & Expo (VMX) which is the veterinary industry's largest and most comprehensive global conference in Orlando, Florida. The VMX is sponsored by the NAVC (North American Veterinary Community).

Back when Rosario was living in Saudi Arabia, she experienced depression and reached out to an organization in Australia called Love your pet, Love your Vet, which is a registered charity that works on improving the well-being of veterinarians, raising awareness and building support to highlight and resolve the extremely high suicide rate within the veterinary profession, and providing these professionals with therapeutic and educational support (Love Your Pet Love Your Vet, 2020). Rosario received immediate assistance from the organization's president. She commented on that experience:

> She responded and was very supportive of me, sent me tools to help me cope, books, and articles. She was the one who told me about the high suicide rate among veterinary doctors. I will always be grateful because she made me realize I was not alone. She asked me if I wanted to join the organization. I immediately accepted.

Rosario knew the organization's president was planning to attend the VMX conference and they arranged to meet. She asked Rosario if she was interested in helping her translate her recent book to Spanish. Her book is about the 'compassion fatigue syndrome' affecting veterinary doctors around the world. Rosario is working with her on this project now.

The conference was a great opportunity for Rosario to network with colleagues from around the world. She met the representatives of a company called AmeriVet. They showed an

interest in her experience and asked her for her resume. Right there on the spot, they interviewed her and offered her a job in Florida. In less than a month, Rosario was signing the contract but, because of the pandemic she had to postpone her relocation until May, 2020. She has been working in this company since and, feels very valued and respected as a professional even though for the time being, she is a technical assistant. The doctors have helped her prepare for the exam to validate her credentials in the U.S.

Rosario mentioned two factors which she thinks can facilitate refugees' integration process. First, although she views the language barrier as a major challenge, she remarked it all depends on where refugees resettle in the U.S. As an example, she contrasted her feeling of isolation in Colorado where there were only a handful of Spanish-speaking people to her feeling of integration in Florida. She posits maybe this is one of the reasons why so many Hispanics come to Florida because of the many ways in which speaking Spanish makes everything more accessible and simpler. Further, she argues:

> The second barrier is the attitude, in how open-minded you are to accept beforehand you will have to make sacrifices and put all your effort into learning the language. You can't make the mistake of getting lazy because most people around you speak Spanish. Those from me are the two factors that will facilitate your integration process.

Final thoughts

Rosario underlines the importance of Venezuelans not becoming dependent on politics to save them from returning to the tyranny. Instead, she stresses Venezuelans should focus on improving their professional capabilities as a way to move forward and compete in the job market. As a final reflection and word of advice to other fellow Venezuelans, Rosario emphasizes:

> One last but crucial issue is that you need to remember this is another culture. You're the one who is here in their country. Don't expect them to understand your point of view, your culture, rather you need to have an open mind and embrace theirs.

Ursula Vegas

Introduction

Ursula is a 40-year-old woman from Zulia state in the west of Venezuela. She was born and raised in Maracaibo city, the state's capital. She is married and has two children. She is very friendly and talkative. Ursula showed a genuine interest in the topic and was quick to admit how pleased she was to be able to have her voice heard through this study.

Ursula's story and education in Venezuela

In 2005, Ursula graduated from the University of Zulia with a degree in veterinary medicine. A month after graduation, she got her first job as sales representative for a veterinary medicine laboratory, where she worked for four years. Next, she worked for a private clinic for about a year, until she and her husband decided to open their own clinic in 2010. She states:

> We had the clinic until we left, we were doing really well, we were growing. We had almost all areas of pet care, from food, accessories, grooming, diagnostics and our latest acquisition was the lab. We were robbed about 6 times at gun point. We were fed up with it. When we made the decision to leave, we sold our clinic to the pet grooming manager, except for the lab equipment which was very costly and had had little use so, we kept it to sell it later.

Like so many Venezuelan citizens, Ursula and her husband grew tired of the insecurity they experienced on a daily basis. She affirms there was no quality of life for her family. The country was deteriorating quickly, the efforts of political leaders on the opposition side to overthrow the regime were fruitless. For them, the country was lost and they refused to continue to live in fear. In 2015, Ursula and her family arrived in Miami and filed a petition for political asylum. Ursula's youngest son was only nine months old then.

Barriers

Ursula's first barrier what is the language. She had studied English in school and only had very basic knowledge. At the time, her mother was living in Boston Massachusetts however, she preferred to live in Florida because she believed the large Spanish speaking population in the state would make life easier for them, at least in the beginning and while they resettle.

The six months wait for her work permit felt like an eternity to Ursula. She was very uncomfortable looking for a job or as she calls it looking for clandestine work, she had no choice, it was a matter of survival. Ursula's first job was at a large laundry room in a hotel which served three other hotels in the area. She worked with people of many different nationalities, some of them had a legal status, others did not. Ursula admitted she was shocked to find out some of her coworkers had been in the country 11, 12 and 14 years without papers. She also observed their behaviors. She explains:

> I noticed many complained about their situation, about their misery but, did not do anything different to change it. That's when I said to myself, I need to improve my English skills and get out of here. I thanked God for having a job because it helped clear my head about what I wanted. I began to work on developing my English skills like never before. I began to use my headphones and listened to English lessons, podcasts, radio stations, whatever I could. I also studied it on my way to and back from work.

Ursula worked long hours and often had to do night shifts. At the same time, she had to take care of her son during the day and breastfeed him. She began to feel overwhelmed. Then, one night, while driving back home from work, Ursula almost had a car accident. She was so physically exhausted she felt asleep at the wheel. Her mother had come to Miami from Boston and was with her in the car and alerted her. Ursula believes if it had not been for her mother, she would have crashed. This was a wake-up call she needed to slow down. She decided to quit her job and look for another with regular working hours.

Facilitators

Ursula came up with a plan that would allow her to work while taking care of her baby. She offered to baby sit for people in the housing complex where she lived with her family. She had developed good and cordial relationships with her neighbors and she was well-liked. Sooner than expected she started getting hours as a baby sitter, mornings and afternoons. When she was not babysitting, she provided grooming services for dogs at home too and, it helped her tremendously. She notes:

> I have a loyal clientele, some of whom have been with me for 4 years, practically since I arrived. In the beginning, I was afraid to advertise my services because back then, I had no papers and you never know. The clients I got was through word of mouth but, I was really cautious all the time.

In 2019, Ursula decided it was time to look for a job related to her profession. She did not care if it was cleaning the place. She only knew she wanted to be back in touch with her profession, with her passion. She received a phone call from a veterinary hospital requesting an interview. The owners were an American woman and a Colombian man.

The American veterinarian asked Ursula to do a round with her in the hospital. It was the practical aspect of the interview process. She comments with excitement:

> Needless to say, I was elated. The whole process lasted four hours and I didn't even notice it. When she asked me to draw blood from a pet I felt like a vampire, I was so ready to do it (laughs). I did very well, I was in my element. A week later, they offered me the job as a technical assistant.

Ursula found out through one of her neighbors that a college nearby was offering an English as a second language (ESL) course. Ursula registered and started attending night classes three times a week. Her English skills continue to improve and she feels more confident than ever before.

Final thoughts

As we wrapped up the interview, I asked Ursula to tell me what she thought were the challenges other Venezuelan refugees might encounter in the U.S., and what were some of the lessons learned she could share with me. She reflected:

> You cannot remain inactive. You have to look for information, network with people, with your old contacts and with new ones. We all arrive with fears and limitations but you cannot to let them paralyze you. You have to take control of your life, do what you have to do to empower yourself. For me that's the only way to achieve success here or anywhere else.

Ursula concludes with a final word of advice for Venezuelan professionals who she says get frustrated very quickly when they cannot work in their professions as soon as they get their job permit and can work legally; they can find out what options are available to them. She provided an interesting analogy:

> So, what I tell these people is to look at it from the opposite perspective and, I ask them to think of an American citizen in Venezuela. Could she/he just start working in his/her profession as soon as she/he arrives? Well, the answer is no. Not only because it's a different system but, to begin with she/he would have to start learning Spanish. Then, validate her/his credentials in the country through the ministry of education for example. So, you cannot expect things to be different here. It's another system, in another country. You are a visitor, you didn't study here, you didn't grow up here and you were not born here. Why would you expect it to be any different?

Ursula advises not to impose limits on themselves. She asserts that sometimes people who get discouraged easily are too tough on themselves and act like their worst enemy. This is the country of opportunities; the goal is to explore them to the fullest and persevere. It is a blessing to be living here and not under the tyranny.

Willian Xavier

Introduction

William is a 37-year-old male and the youngest of the male participants. He is single and the youngest of two siblings. He comes from a tightly-knit family which made it very difficult

for him to leave. As soon as we started the interview, he seemed to talk easily about his home back in Venezuela. Even though he shared information about his experiences, he chose his words carefully as he answered the questions. He brought a slightly different perspective to his experience as compared to the rest of the participants.

William's story and education in Venezuela

William graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration with emphasis on marketing management from the University of Carabobo in Valencia, which is the third largest city in Venezuela. He worked as an administrator for the university for a few years, until he and a partner decided to start up their own business in marketing management. Their first customer was Kraft foods Venezuela. They managed all their internal and external customers advertising and marketing. Kraft had two plants; one with 600 employees and the other with about 1,800 employees. They also got another big customer Kimberly Clark; for whom they did advertising including point of purchase (POP) material in supermarkets.

William clarifies his partner was in charge of design while he was in charge of sales and was the face to the customers. He noted that after they got a portfolio of important and well-known customers, they started getting many new ones and the company experienced substantial growth in a relatively short time.

On a trip to Miami to purchase items for the company, a new currency devaluation hit Venezuela. They were already having some problems with timely payments, because these companies had different types of providers and used to pay them accordingly to the criticality of their services. William explains:

> The providers who got paid first were the suppliers of critical raw material for production. Our service was not considered essential and therefore it took them more than 60 days to issue our payments. After the currency devaluation, we lost a lot of money, we

were almost in red numbers, so we decided it was not worth the effort. It was at that very moment; I made the decision to leave.

At first, William struggled to leave his family and everything behind but, at the same time, he was saddened to realize the country that his parents knew no longer existed and that is one of the reasons why the crisis has affected them more than any other generation. They worked really hard for years hoping to have a peaceful and safe retirement, and they do not have it, far from it. He added his older family members and relatives are struggling to survive and many have lost much of their wealth.

Barriers

In July 2015, William started working at one of the largest tire companies in the world and four months later, he received a letter from management explaining the company was going through a restructuring process due to some financial issues and that he was being laid off. Despite his good command of the English language, he did not know what lay off meant. William had to ask his coworkers for an explanation, he was devastated by the news and shocked as he was completely unaware the company had this kind of issues. He believed being a recent hire was the main reason for letting him go.

William did not waste any time and began his job search the next day. Six days after being laid off, the same tire company contacted him to reinstate him in his job. He accepted and went back to work. He had already applied for various positions during the six days prior to company's callback.

One of the companies he had applied for a job showed interest in interviewing him. The company offered him a better position as business development manager. William decided this was his moment to negotiate. He went back to his manager at the tire company and explained the situation and the company matched the offer with the condition that he would be willing to

relocate to any of the 50 states as per the corporation's needs. William declined the offer and quit.

Facilitators

Willian acknowledges having a solid English language foundation was the greatest facilitator of his migration journey. He had always liked the English language, studied it formally and had a good command of the language when he arrived six years ago. He brought all his credential documents legalized.

William mentioned having a network of friends in Miami was instrumental during his resettlement process. He claims it would have been much harder to adapt as well as he has without their help, motivation and support. Besides they were the greatest source of information, especially for job searching.

One strategy William thinks worked really well for him was to start applying for jobs and going to interviews to get a feel for what sort of questions they asked and to learn about the interviewing and hiring process. He did all this while waiting for a work permit. William explains he needed to get the experience because everything in the U.S., was new to him. He turned a barrier into an opportunity and viewed it as training and self-development.

William received about three job offers, before receiving his permit. He informed the companies he was waiting for it after going through the recruitment process. When he finally started working for the tire company, on his first week on the job, the company sent him for a two-week training to Jacksonville, Florida. He admits he struggled a bit because of the technical terms; the terminology was new to him and not because of his English language skills per se . Nevertheless, he was working in the Miami office where he used 30% English and 70% Spanish. He recognizes he did not have the urge to be perfectly bilingual back then but regardless, he

continued working on improving it.

In the company where William has been working for four years now, all his coworkers are Americans and so is his supervisor. The company supports William's desire to grow and develop and agreed to pay for his tuition to attend advanced English classes at Broward College. He affirms his English is much better and more fluid. He is now responsible for the brand program management and for expanding the account base in the Miami-Dade and Broward counties.

In his desire to grow professionally and with the company support, William began to do a master degree. He proudly states:

> Now, I am doing a master degree in leadership and entrepreneurship. I am graduating in February 2021, I did it all online. The program included a one-week experience in San Francisco, right before the pandemic. It was mainly focused on start-ups. As part of the experience, we also went to Silicon Valley. We visited Google, Twitter, Adobe, Zoom. The degree is valid here and in Spain. I want to dedicate myself to working on sustainability of the environment, of the thoughtful use of resources. I think it'll be a key player in the future of the planet.

Final thoughts

William is convinced the language barrier is the greatest challenge for any migrant however, he argues migrants should always strive to keep their identity intact and be proud of it. He illustrates his views with an anecdote:

> I used to get really frustrated because I wanted to speak English like my coworkers but they were born here and I wasn't. Then, I realized that I shouldn't try to do that because that is precisely what makes me who I am. I remember we were once in a company meeting in Atlanta. We were asked to introduce ourselves, say where we worked and mention something peculiar or unique about us. When my turn came, I stood up introduced myself and said that I was known for my accent and everybody laughed. It felt good because that's my identity and I don't have to pretend to be something or somebody I'm not. I am Latino no matter which language I speak that's who I am. I like to be genuine and I think people like that too.

According to William, learning the language is extremely important to get a good job. Specially in South Florida where 'Americans who live here think this is a messy place'. According to William, Americans do not trust Latinos too much but, once they can communicate in the language and if they behave, are honest and reliable then Latino migrants can rest assured they will gain the support and confidence of many Americans, "good things will start to happen, you reap what you sow."

Yanis Zerpa

Introduction

Yanis is a 58-year-old male from Barinas state which has long ranked among Venezuela's most important states in cattle, agriculture and oil production. Yanis was born in Venezuela but, his family is originally from Cuba. They fled to Venezuela because of the communist regime imposed by Fidel Castro. He is married and has two children; a boy and a girl, now adults and both college graduates.

Yaniz is personable, talkative and very friendly. From the get-go he displayed his great sense of humor, telling jokes to break the ice so he said. The interview was pleasant and the longest of all interviews. He was very open and frank about his experiences in Venezuela and in the U.S.

Yanis' story and education in Venezuela

Yanis graduated with a degree in Veterinary Medicine in 1985. During his studies he worked as a veterinary assistant. After graduation he worked as a veterinary products sales representative and was responsible for three states; Yaracuy, Lara, and Falcón which were the largest consumers of the lab's products nationally.

Yanis' family resettled as migrants themselves in Barinas state and by the time Yanis

graduated from college they already had cattle ranches and farms in the area. The idea was that Yanis would work in the ranches once he graduated. During his studies Yanis specialized in veterinary genetics and reproduction. His idea was to get more experience first before dedicating himself full time to the family's cattle ranches and farms.

In 1988, Yanis began to work in the cattle ranch and developed the first artificial insemination program in the state. In 1992, he also worked in the Venezuelan chapter of the U.S. Feed Grain Council as research trial supervisor. He developed and executed sustainable feeding alternatives in tropical conditions using Venezuelan beef cattle.

For 22 years, Yanis did extensive work on the family's ranches and farms. Some of his accomplishments include managing grazing dairy assets to optimize and improve production. He directed the health, reproduction, nutrition, and pasture management programs. He was in charge of supervising all the personnel, evaluating their performance, and providing training and development.

Yanis was not planning to leave Venezuela despite the socio-economic turmoil in the country, he was holding on hoping the situation would improve. One event marked a change of direction. A friend of his oldest son, whose father was a millionaire was kidnapped and murdered. The captors had requested a ransom and it was paid and yet the boy was killed. There was a lot of commotion in the community. Yanis began to overprotect his kids and would not allow them to go anywhere by themselves.

When Yanis' oldest son graduated from high school and applied to college, he could not get in despite his good grades. The university where he applied was highly competitive and the number of applicants higher than the quota established. Yanis' parents had sent him to study English in the United States in his youth so, Yanis decided to do the same for his son, to give

him an edge. His son went to study in New York state where Yanis had some relatives nearby. When his son finished the program, he contacted Yanis and told him he had applied to three colleges and was accepted. By this time, his daughter had also graduated from high school and wanted to go to study with her brother. This is when Yanis made the supposedly temporary decision to go to the U.S. to try to get him the documents through the Cuban Adjustment Law, since their grandparents were from Cuba, they qualified. When Yanis informed his family of his decision, they were in disbelief. He comments:

> My family jokes around saying that I decided to do the paperwork after my daughter left because she had me wrapped around her finger. However, when I told my wife that I was leaving for the United States she wouldn't believe me because I hardly if ever left the ranch. So, I planned to get all the papers in order to get them their permanent residence and go back to Venezuela in less than a year, little did I know!

Barriers

Yanis' plan was to get all the papers in order for himself and his kids to get their permanent residence and go back in less than a year. It actually took one year and eight months to get the papers. He recounts:

> The initial plan was to stay for a short time because I had my cattle farming in my ranch in Venezuela and I had to take care of it. I went to Houston because I didn't want to live in Miami and look where I am now (laughs).

Yanis was worried about his age at the time he came to the U.S. He was 50 years old and he thinks he had become more selective about work because he had worked in his profession for many years and had accumulated a wealth of experience. So, when he got job offers way below his skills and capabilities he was frustrated. At the same time, he was worried about keeping a steady job because if he was laid off how was he going to live or help his children if they needed him. To make matters worse, the situation back in Venezuela was making it very difficult to manage and sustain his family ranches and farms. He explains:

> I did a lot of work on genetics on bovine cattle. Additionally, I had saved some Holstein semen for artificial insemination which turned out to be great for dairy products. We also did some work with veterinary doctors in Brazil. Sadly, little by little I have been selling everything in the ranch I worked so hard to keep for years, because given the state of the crisis in Venezuela, it is impossible to sustain it for much longer.

When I asked Yanis if he was able to get a job with his credentials and given his vast experience, he said he searched nonstop and could not find anything. One day, he decided to seek help through his network of colleagues. He states:

> I contacted a friend who knew a Venezuelan veterinary doctor who had a good position in California. He told me he would put me in contact with him but never did. So, out of desperation because I needed to find a job, I searched online for him and found an article he had published and send him an email. He responded at the moment he was busy but that he would get in touch with me in a couple of days and he did. He recommended me to some farmers near Gainesville Florida where he had studied English and had worked part-time for them. This city was called Madison. I was hired as a manager and worked there for a year and really liked the job.

In the meantime, his wife had left Venezuela and moved with him. He recognized that Madison was very isolated, in the middle of nowhere, which was fine with him but not for his wife, who had her own insurance company, was an honorary vice-consul for Italy, had a high status and, on top of everything spoke no English. Nevertheless, she decided to stay and study English. The advantage of Madison was that, contrary to Miami, there were almost no Hispanic people so it was easier for her to learn it and practice it every day.

Interestingly for Yanis one of greatest challenges is the cultural difference or culture shock. Although he believes Miami is a cultural melting pot and is different from the rest of the U.S., Yanis' initial resistance to live in Florida has to do with the indignation many Venezuelans feel towards the government of Cuba. Yanis reflects:

> I believe that South Florida is managed by the Cuban people, and that is why I left Venezuela. You very well know about the role, influence and meddling of Cuban officials in the crisis in Venezuela. I don't want to sound toxic; I think there are many

> good people from Cuba or of Cuban origin, I just did not want to live here but, I have come to terms with it.

Facilitators

Yanis had the advantage of having learned English in New York City after his high school graduation and, he also attended summer camps in the U.S. , in his younger years. So, he did not have to face the most common language barrier affecting refugees and asylum-seekers. This opened many doors for him.

One of Yanis' friends and colleagues gave him an advice that really resonated with him. Yanis says it was a wake-up call that for the first time made him reconsider validating his credentials in the U.S. This is what his friend said to Yanis:

> You are not getting any younger, working in farms is really tough and requires physical strength and stamina. You need to validate your credentials to be able to work in another environment, or you will always be a manual worker or a technician, and no more.

Those words had an impact on Yanis. He immediately began to search for information to start his credential validation process. At the same time, he got a job in Miami and was trained as a vet technician. It was his first time working with cats and dogs and for him it was a whole new world since he had always worked with large animals. This job is less strenuous and not as physically demanding as working in farms and ranches with large animals.

Another facilitator for Yanis was being bilingual, even in Miami. According to him, many more doors open for bilingual people. He says he sees it every day in the hospital where he is working now. With so many Spanish-speaking clients he often finds himself in the role of a communication bridge between English speaking doctors and Spanish speaking clients.

Final thoughts

When I asked Yanis about sharing any final thoughts, reflections or advice for other

Venezuelan professionals planning to migrate, he offered one that he thinks is a game changer in 5 words: Learn to do your resumé. He argues:

> In Venezuela, we are used to doing it chronologically. Here, it is practically like marketing you have to sell yourself. If there are things you have done that don't apply to the position you're seeking, you have to remove them or somehow make them seem like they're what the company really needs. It was hard for me to do and, I think a lot of Venezuelans will struggle with this factor unless they seek help from more experienced job seekers.

Lastly, Venezuelan migrants need to understand things here take time, unlike Venezuela where everything goes at a faster pace. It may have worked there but, here it will not. People need to keep calm, take one step at a time, work towards their goals, prepare themselves, study and grow in a steady and honest manner to succeed.

Key Findings

In this section I report the themes and findings from the in-depth interviews with the 12 participants and secondary sources. As I reviewed and analyzed the data, I discerned 4 major emergent themes: 1) acculturation, 2) entry and opportunity, 3) social, 4) stressors, problem-solving and coping mechanisms. I give a more detailed account of each of the themes in the following section.

Acculturation

Context, culture and structure define people's identities. They are closely connected to an intricate system of roles, social status, groups and networks. When refugees flee their homeland to another country, no matter how culturally close or distant the new country may be, there will always be implications for acculturation and identity during resettlement. First and foremost, their identities become detached, almost interrupted, so refugees have to start the difficult process of reconstruction of their new identities (Ager & Strang, 2010).

The complex aspect of acculturation in the integration process of refugees, requires time and self-reflection mechanisms to renovate their cultural identities and develop a sense of belonging. Through self-reflection refugees can evaluate who they are or have become as well as the aspects of their identities that no longer serves them in the new society (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Georgina was the first participant to mention the issue of identity loss. She reported nobody addressed her as professor anymore, which she grew accustomed to after more than 20 years in that role. Similarly, Isabel reported telling her dentist she used to be a veterinarian, and then feeling the impact of the dentist's reply that no matter what, she will always be a veterinarian. These are some examples of the sense of identity loss this group experienced.

One unexpected finding about an aspect of identity was that some of the participants reported their impression the word 'refugee' carried a very negative connotation and thus preferred the asylee or asylum seeker designation. According to their recounts, the word refugee in their new environment means, besides a person in need of protection, a burden to society, an uneducated person, a person likely to use up resources and not give much back. These participants claimed they did not fit in such category; they believe they had much to offer and contribute to society. In other words, they rejected the refugee designation as an element of their new identities. This benefits freeloader stereotype assigned to refugees can be very damaging, especially when considering how difficult it can be, as in most cases, they have lost everything.

Although extensive research has been conducted on the acculturation process of refugees in the U.S., the focus has been on the largest population of refugees who mostly come from non-Western cultures. Researchers have reported the difficulty non-Western refugees experience in developed countries based upon culture distance, not only in terms of language but customs and

social structure of the host country (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Obviously, non-western culture is not applicable to Venezuelans. Nonetheless, they are culturally distant in terms of the language, which is easier to overcome than the overall culture domain.

As expected, all participants concluded the major facilitator or barrier to acculturation was English language ability/acquisition. Six participants had acquired a strong language foundation and/or spoke it fluently upon arrival in the U.S. Yanis used to come to the U.S., for summer camp in his youth and after high school graduation studied it for a few months in New York City. Antonio spent about 10 months studying English in Australia and living with an Australian family. Estela enrolled in an English language immersion program for a year. Isabel studied it in Boston after her high school graduation. William liked the language and started studying it in his teenage years, Olga also studied it for years because her intention was to pursue a master degree. These 6 participants went through the normal struggles of resettlement and got jobs immediately soon after obtaining their work permits. Five out of 6, although overqualified and despite the lack of credential recognition, obtained employment in their fields, except for Antonio who being a civil engineer started out working at a dealership selling cars, and later became a certified developer in Florida and a business owner.

The recurring categories under the acculturative theme had to do with language ability and learning the culture at the top of the list, although most participants were somewhat familiar with the U.S., often visited for tourism, studies, and business. All reported having to learn and adapt to new government policies and regulations which differed significantly from their origin country and their own pre-conceived notions. Despite the crisis in Venezuela, participants had an above average socio-economic and professional status and having to adapt to a much lower status had a direct impact on their identities. They also reported the complexities of the job

search process which is considerably different from their home country. Only three participants mentioned discrimination as an issue they encountered during their job search.

The learning refugees go through is complicated and diverse, and it is not necessarily a straightforward method of simply building on previous information, nor is it always a beneficial or advantageous process. The fact they are forced to recognize and accept their previous learning and experience have little or no value, triggers a difficult unlearning process beginning with the deconstruction of their identities.

Entry and opportunity

Policies that emphasize rapid self-sufficiency through any type of job over acculturation persist as mayor obstacles for refugees to access education opportunities for upskilling according to the host country parameters. Much of the literature emphasizes education in the host country as a marker of integration for refugees (Becker, 1964; Ager & Strang, 2004)

The need for refugees to take the first job they can get, comes not as a goal to become self-sufficient, but to survive. As we have read from their stories, the majority of the participants worked without documents shortly after arrival. According to USCIS (2020) before 2020, the wait time was 150 days and now it has increased to a full year wait to get a work permit, which prevents them from focusing on anything else. Recertification for practitioners is expensive, not readily accessible, and requires a high standard of English skills.

Ross et al. (2019) point out that barriers to the accomplishment of such an important objective as education, generate confusion and delay the resettlement of refugees in the process of acculturation and integration in the host society.

The most frequently cited categories in entry and opportunity was training and development opportunities in the U.S. Venezuelan professionals learned soon enough that to

advance professionally in their careers, educational opportunities were vital for future success. In the same way, they learned access to these opportunities was costly, thus, financial difficulties was the second most cited category. A probable explanation is half of the participants are waiting for a decision on their asylum cases, which means no access to benefits of any kind. In close relationship with the previous categories, participants indicated the depreciation of their home country professional experience and education, followed by the rigid U.S., certifications and licensing process. The times when their foreign degree was accepted were for jobs well below with their skills and sometimes at a minimum wage salary. Some, however, accepted these positions for fear the interruption of their careers would weaken their skills and to keep in current with their professions and learn the ways U.S., professionals work.

Social

Social capital plays a pivotal role in improving the acculturation of refugees. Connections within an ethnic community, how members of ethnic groups assist migrants, and family connections with relatives in the new country are indicators of social links. Social networks or bridges outside the ethnic community and with the host country target population aids refugees in acquiring cultural capital and most importantly in improving language skills.

The participants in this study all benefited from their social capital, from their bonds, links and bridges, at varying levels. According to Portes (1998) there is "the consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures." (p. 6). All participants had family members already residing in the U.S., friends and/or professional connections. However, they all established new connections and friendships with members of other ethnic communities and U.S. citizens.

In the social theme, the category family in the U.S., and back home has a prominent role in the lives of these Venezuelans professionals, as did their home country connections in the U.S. They often emphasized receiving help from friends, colleagues and acquaintances as crucial in applying for jobs, getting recommendations and obtaining jobs, learning about immigration processes, about benefits, free English language courses, pro-bono immigration lawyers, and catholic church services in the area who served the Venezuelan refugee and asylum seeker population.

Stressors, problem-solving and coping mechanisms

Without exception, all the refugees I interviewed expressed immense gratitude to the U.S., for allowing them to enjoy a sense of safety and freedom they had long forgotten. Furthermore, despite all the difficulties along the way, they manifested feeling satisfied with their new life and consider their resilience and grit; their positive attitude, tenacity, and persistence as the main facilitators to their progress and adaptation. Participants also mentioned the opposite of these traits such as negative attitude, pessimism and unrealistic expectations as the main barriers to integration and led to feelings of failure.

One of the participants, Karina, a veterinarian, deserves a special mention as an example of personal agency, resilience, persistence and a desire to grow. She did not speak the language well when she arrived. Through her sense of agency and proactivity she took English as a second language classes at the college level. To improve her academic English skills, she pursued a three-year veterinary technician associate degree, went through different jobs, until she found her passion when she got a job in veterinary research. It is worth noting Karina mentioned she did not need a Florida veterinary license to do research. During her 15-year tenure at the research center, she was promoted to operations manager, then to operations director, and last to head of

the occupational health and safety unit. She was also an active member of the Institutional Animal Care & Use Committee (IACUC) which was one of her favorite areas because it dealt with animal protection and welfare. Karina is also pursuing a master degree in clinical research organization and management. She is now a published author in scientific journals.

The participants frequently stated feelings of freedom from fear, violence, intimidation, and oppression as key elements and enablers of a sense of connection to their new communities. Although they frequently cited being away from family and relatives as an emotional stressor, they recognized they had begun to feel more at home and it helped them cope and adapt to their surroundings. As Mercedes stated:

> I told my husband just get me out of here because I'm going insane with this situation. I can't live like this. I told him I want you alive, I want my kids alive; I want to be able to walk in the streets, I want our kids to be able to do their regular activities, I have found that peace here.

Fear was at the top of the list not only because of the fear of their traumatic experiences for which they fled in the first place, but also fear their asylum petitions would be rejected by immigration authorities. The second most cited category was personal agency. They highlighted the importance of having a sense of control of one's life and taking the steps to improve one's situation and move forward as the most helpful coping mechanism. Even when the prospects do not appear in one's favor, doing one's own due diligence especially in the professional arena, they assure pays off in the long run. Some of the participants still experience stress and anxiety about their families, relatives and friends back in Venezuela, since that crisis never seemed to get any better and to the contrary the pandemic has made it worse. They also find it stressful not being able to return and have the need to provide some form of humanitarian aid to their compatriots. The participants have organized groups in their communities to raise funds for food and medications to send to the needy in Venezuela.

I report the themes and their categories in Table 5 with the frequency by which the group reported them in the interviews. To illustrate the categories in each theme, in Table 6, I provided examples of participants' quotes to the open-ended questions which reflect the multidimensional nature of Venezuelan refugees' resettlement process.

To address the research questions regarding the career experiences of Venezuelan refugee professionals after resettlement, in Table 7, I present a summary table of the barriers and facilitators this group encountered, to further their education, to validate their credentials, and to resume their careers. The group coincided one of the major barriers was the lack of an official centralized government agency to provide information for foreign professionals about the state credential validation process or at least guide them or refer them to the pertaining professional board. Therefore, they had to rely on their social networks and then, proceed to verify the veracity of the information which is often disseminated in various entities.

Table 5. Barriers and Facilitators Categories/Codes Frequency Per Theme

Theme	Categories	Frequency	Total	Percentage
Acculturative	Language ability	83	149	15%
	Government regulations and policies	22		
	Different from home country	14		
	Socio-economic status prior to arrival	12		
	Familiar with the U.S.	8		
	Identity	4		
	Discrimination	3		
	Complicated job search/resume	3		
Entry and Opportunity	Training and development in the U.S.	58	391	37%
	Finance	40		
	Profession	39		
	Home country professional experience	38		
	Positive job experience in the U.S.	38		
	Underemployment/overqualified	34		
	U.S. Certification/Licensing Process	30		
	Policies Impact	21		
	Negative job experience in the U.S.	18		
	Foreign degree/experience acceptance	18		
	Foreign education/credentials discounted	12		
	Work without authorization	11		
	Foreign credentials in order	9		
	Finding work	8		
	Home country work experiences discounted	5		
	Competition	5		
	Lack of information from official sources	4		
	Benefits	3		
Social	Family	64	152	14%
	Home country connections	52		
	Connections in the U.S.	30		
	Family and relatives living in the U.S.	6		
Stressors, problem-solving & coping mechanisms	Fear	46	358	34%
	Personal agency	44		
	Insecurity	41		
	Persecution	34		
	Challenges for refugees	32		
	Expectations	30		
	Persistence/Encouragement	19		
	Political dissent	18		
	Positive outlook and resilience	17		
	Help others	16		
	Desire to grow	13		
	Community support	12		
	Trauma	11		
	Asylum petition	10		
	Faith/Church	9		
	Optimism about new professional life	6		

Table 6. Barriers and Facilitators Themes with Examples of Quotes from Refugees

Theme	Examples of quotes from refugees
Acculturative	"South Florida where so many people speak Spanish makes it easier to manage than in other states. However, the language barrier definitely affected me." Mercedes "At home I was a university professor, I had a good status but, I was clear I may end up doing a job that is not according to my credentials and experience." Isabel “We used to come to the United States quite often, but on vacation, very different from living here.” Corina “I wanted to speak English like my coworkers but, they were born here I wasn’t. I realized that I shouldn’t try to do that because that is precisely what makes me who I am.” William
Entry and Opportunity	"You have to work on whatever is available, on whatever you can get, not on your career." Corina "They never had anything, my conclusion was that the Department of Children and Families is more focused on people with very, very low level of education, and that was the type of person who they can help and offer a wide range of options, but people with an intermediate or high level of education, they cannot." Antonio "Your degree is not worth anything. What is worth is the work experience that one acquires in the United States and any degree or study that one can do in the United States has much more value than some degree brought from another country." Antonio "In the county where I live there is a place called Career Source Broward, Broward is the name of the county and they have a program, a course called professional placement network where they prepare you on how to look for a job. I recommend it 100%." Estela "The company is responsible for reviewing the entire curriculum to certify that it is equivalent or on par with the one here. I am a graduate teacher in preschool education. I am now a validated professional in this country.” Corina "The lab hired me as a veterinary doctor, because in research you don’t need to have a license to work." Karina

Table 6 Continued

Social	"I prepared my resume and uploaded it to a job search website called Indeed. I did it with the help from a friend who knew what format to use here." Isabel "I had many friends here who helped me get some gigs here and there and survive before my work permit arrived." William "You have to look for information locally, get in touch with colleagues, network as much as you can, you don't know when a new opportunity presents itself. Networking is key." Isabel "The company' owners were from Venezuela. I presented a copy of my university degree and they did not ask me for any revalidation or anything, they just accepted me." Estela
Stressors, problem-solving, and coping	"I had all my transcripts and my diploma translated and in order. When I called to find out what the requirements were, I already had everything." Corina "You have to go and look for the specific person who knows about it, because if you listen to all people's comments you do nothing. I have learned that your own diligence is what counts." Corina "I need to prepare myself I cannot stop studying because I am 55 years old and I can tell it is already a factor that will impact me if I don't continue studying and keeping up to date." Karina "There is a program in a church in Weston where they meet every Tuesday and help the community to look for a job. They give talks, advice, and anything that helps the immigrants and refugees, and many Venezuelans attend." Estela "The challenges are the bills. The concern that you have to pay rent and services, that alone will distance you from focusing on how to move forward and grow professionally." Rosario "You have to take control of your life, do what you have to do to empower yourself. For me that's the only way to achieve success. The spiritual aspect is very important to make you strong." Ursula "Another challenge is lack of information specially for professionals from other countries." Olga

Table 7. Barriers and Facilitators Summary

Barriers	Facilitators
Lack of English language skills	English language ability
Inadequate government agency support for professionals with experience	Bilingualism (Spanish and English) is in high demand in Florida for many positions
Foreign degree and work experience mostly discounted with some exceptions.	Home country and new U.S. social connections facilitate employment.
State agency referrals for registration in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses while asylum petition is pending are not allowed.	Voluntary agencies such as the catholic church offer multiple services for free including pro bono attorney services, counseling and case evaluation
Costly and time-consuming degree credential validation. It can take more than 3 years to complete.	Referrals from FDCF for career and vocational support.
Unrealistic expectations about working in area of expertise soon after arrival.	A can-do mindset to overcome obstacles, determination and resilience.
State refugee agencies have no employment opportunities for professionals, but a variety of low-skill jobs.	Career assistance provided to refugees by organizations such as CareerSource Broward (CSBD) and Back-on-Track Network.
Expenses related to foreign degree evaluation and translation services required for validation.	Diplomas and transcripts in order, legalized and translated for credential validation.
No official entity provides information on professional credential validation.	Community members can be important sources of information.
Lengthy waiting time for work to receive work authorization.	South Florida as a Hispanic melting pot facilitates integration in the community.
Forced to work for survival while undocumented causes refugees and asylum seekers fear and anxiety because deportation is a possibility.	Some employers accept foreign credentials for unregulated careers, such as business and marketing management and human resources.
Some employers accept foreign degrees as for positions below degree level.	Self-efficacy, proactivity, personal agency, and adaptation.
Spanish is widely spoken and lack of practice can affect refugees' English language fluency.	Family and friends constitute an important support system and guidance.
A few reported discrimination, ageism, and refugee stigma.	Free counseling services to refugees through the local interfaith network.
Competition in the Florida job market is fierce and more difficult for refugees who do not offer added-value skills.	Refugees with realistic expectations, humility and determination are more likely to do well in the American culture overall.
Asylum procedure and administration denies any benefits to asylum seekers.	Some state agencies fund education refugee programs.
Word of mouth information may lead to unnecessary delays or mistakes.	Support from the Cuban community, including politicians in South Florida.
Stringent state policies for asylum seekers.	Career assessment and readiness programs.
Referrals from FDCF to career services available to approved asylees/refugees only.	Ability to pay for legal representation for immigration court proceedings.
USCIS Asylum case backlog has kept asylum seekers waiting for a decision for years	Financial capabilities upon arrival including bank accounts in the U.S. or the E.U.

Venezuelan Doctors of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) in Florida

The finding about the situation of Venezuelan veterinarians deserves special consideration. It is uncommon as it is remarkable. To fully understand the extent of the impact, it is necessary to present some background information about the profession's policies and regulations for foreign professionals in the U.S., and then, at the state level in Florida.

According to the American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA) the leading advocate for the veterinary profession, holders of a foreign degree from a not accredited veterinary school must meet the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) equivalency requirement by completing the AVMA's Educational Commission for Foreign Veterinary Graduates (ECFVG) certification program. In addition, to the AVMA requirements, candidates must comply with corresponding state requirements for licensure to be able to practice their profession.

The steps to obtaining equivalency from the ECFVG include the following:

1. Candidates must enroll in the certification program, provide proof of graduation, foreign college credentials and online application. The ECFVG will verify the information directly with the school. The AVMA provides a list of the world's recognized veterinary colleges. For Venezuela the colleges listed are:
    1. Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV)
    2. Universidad del Zulia (LUZ)
    3. Universidad Centro-occidental Lisandro Alvarado (UCLA)
    4. Universidad Nacional Experimental Francisco de Miranda (UNEFM)
    5. Universidad Nacional Experimental Romulo Gallegos (UNERG)
2. Complete one of the following three standard English language examination.

a) TOEFL iBT® or Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based Test (iBT)
b) IELTS™ or International English Language Testing System
c) The Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment

3. Candidates must take and complete successfully the ECFVG's Basic and Clinical Sciences Examination (BCSE)
4. Candidates must present proof of surgical experience or take and pass the Clinical Proficiency Examination (CPE). The hands-on, performance-based CPE is a 3-day, 7-section, clinical skills assessment conducted by the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine or any other accredited testing institution. The expertise and knowledge level required to pass each segment of the CPE is that of an entry level US or Canadian veterinarian or a recent graduate.
5. The final step is taking and achieving a passing score of 80 points of the North American Veterinary Licensing Examination (NAVLE), which is another requirement for licensure to practice veterinary medicine in all licensing jurisdictions in the US and Canada. The NAVLE consists of 360 clinically relevant multiple-choice questions on all species (ECFVG – About Us, 2020).

The AVMA is the regulatory and licensing entity for the veterinary profession in the U.S. Furthermore, it is also the entity that administers the credentialing process of foreign graduates. Campbell (2018) posits that each profession is represented by one of these entities and, they are usually referred to as licensing and regulation boards. It is precisely their regulations and rules that present the most arduous obstacle for refugee professionals to overcome.

In table 8, I present an approximate breakdown of the costs associated with the five steps to degree re-credentialing described above. These expenses are related to the process all candidates with foreign veterinary medicine credentials must abide to per the AVMA board.

Table 8. AVMA Cost of Certification for Foreign Veterinary Degree Holders

Re-credentialing Steps	**Approximate costs**
ECFVG certification program registration	USD $1,400
English language examination	USD $150 to $$250 (depending on test selected)
Basic and Clinical Sciences Examination	USD $220
Clinical Proficiency Examination	USD $7,430 + $200 (administrative fee)
NAVLE	USD $690

From "Educational commission for foreign veterinary graduates," by the American Veterinary Medical Association, n.d., (https://www.avma.org/education/ecfvg). In the public domain.

The rules and regulations are too restrictive. The process time-consuming and expensive for refugee professionals who are usually in survival mode and with financial restraints before during and after their resettlement process. The participants who are veterinarians and wanted to work in their profession could do so only as technical assistants with low salaries.

Veterinary licensing and regulations in Florida

The Florida Veterinary Medical Association (FVMA) was established in 1928 and is the third largest veterinary medical association in the United States. A few years later, some of the FVMA founding members created the Board of Veterinary Medicine.

It is the responsibility of the Florida Board of Veterinary Medicine (FBVM) to license and regulate veterinarians. Members of the board meet once a year to assess license applications, examine disciplinary processes, and undertake informal hearings on licensure and discipline. The board carries out the terms of its legislation and performs general business as needed. The governor of Florida appoints seven members to preside over the board, five veterinarians and

two laypersons with no relation to the veterinary profession. The Florida senate has to confirm the members who serve for four-year terms (FVMA, 2020).

The execution of the statutes of the FBVM is what has become a turning point for Venezuelan veterinarians refugees and asylum seekers residing in the state. On August 17, 2019 group of Venezuelan veterinary doctors who graduated from Venezuelan universities, came together and founded the Association of Venezuelan Veterinarians in Exile (Asociación de veterinarios venezolanos en el exilio or AVVE), which has had a major impact on the professional lives of Venezuelan veterinarians, I will describe its role in the next section.

The Association of Venezuelan Veterinarians in Exile (AVVE)

The main objective of the association is to bring together all exiled Venezuelan veterinarians and promote their professional performance in the U.S. In addition, one important goal of the association is to keep Venezuelan veterinary doctors at the highest level of education through continuing education (AVVE, 2020).

In promoting the professional performance of Venezuelan veterinarians, the association executive board searched for legal advice to explore the applicability of one of Florida statutes regulating the veterinary medicine profession to the particular Venezuela's situation and specially because there was a legal precedent with Cuban veterinarians. The association hired an attorney to represent its board members and similarly situated Venezuelan veterinarians in pursuing licensure under the provisions of §474.207(3) Florida statutes.

The statute §474.207 Licensure by Examination, section 2(b) stipulates that any person wanting to become a licensed veterinarian in the state must apply to the board for a licensure examination and submit proof that he/she:

1. Graduated from a College of Veterinary Medicine accredited by the Council on Education of the American Veterinary Medical Association; or
2. Graduated from a Veterinary Medicine listed in the American Veterinary Medical Association Roster of the World Veterinary Colleges and obtained a certificate from the Education Commission for Foreign Veterinary Graduates; or
3. For foreign veterinary degree holders, having obtained a certificate from the Education Commission for Foreign Veterinary Graduates (ECFVG) (Regulations of Professions and Occupations, 2018, para. 1).

The ECFVG requisites were previously described in detail as one of the most formidable obstacles for Venezuelan veterinarians to be licensed. However, through the tenacity and leadership of the AVVE board members, they found a section in the statutes that could be applicable to Venezuelan veterinarians, provided they met certain criteria established in the statute. The aforementioned section establishes the following:

Per the Regulations of Professions and Occupations (2018) notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph (2)(b), an applicant shall be deemed to have met the education requirements for licensure upon submission of evidence that the applicant meets the following:

(b) The applicant immigrated to the United States after leaving her or his home country because of political reasons, provided such country is located in the Western Hemisphere and lacks diplomatic relations with the United States.

Additionally, the applicant must meet the following criteria:

1. Was a Florida resident immediately preceding her or his application for licensure;

2. Demonstrates to the board, through submission of documentation verified by the applicant's respective professional association in exile, that she or he received a professional

degree in veterinary medicine from a college or university located in the country from which she or he emigrated. However, the board may not require receipt transcripts from the Republic of Cuba as a condition of eligibility under this section; and

3. Lawfully practiced her or his profession for at least 3 years (Regulations of Professions and Occupations, 2018, para. 3)

Section 2(b) is applicable to Venezuela. According to Herman (2019), on January 23, 2019 Nicolás Maduro unilaterally broke off diplomatic relations with the U.S., and gave the embassy's personnel in Caracas 72 hours to leave the country. This decision was the result of the U.S., recognizing the government's opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president. Furthermore, the U.S., also considers the Venezuelan National Assembly, which Juan Guaidó currently leads, to be the only legitimate federal institution as established in the constitution of Venezuela.

As pressure mounted and threats from the Maduro regime to the U.S., continued, on March 11, 2019, the U.S., Department of State announced the temporary suspension of operations of U.S. Embassy in Caracas and withdrawal of diplomatic personnel. All consular services were suspended and the embassy closed. Nowadays, the embassy serves Venezuelans as well as and U.S citizens residing in Venezuela virtually for certain document processes and, for in-person appointments at the U.S. embassy located in neighboring Bogotá, Colombia (U.S. Citizen Services, 2020).

It is worth noting the statute mentions the Florida board may not require transcripts from Cuban citizens for eligibility purposes and for the same reasons of non-existent diplomatic relations between the two countries and being in exile status in the U.S. This precedent was crucial for the attorneys when they represented AVVE and presented the case before the Florida

Board of Veterinary Medicine. Furthermore, Cuban veterinarians are allowed to take the NAVLE examination for licensure instead of having to go through the steps established by the Education Commission for Foreign Veterinary Graduates (ECFVG).

In December 2019, in an unprecedented historical event for Venezuelans, the Association was formally recognized by the Florida Board of Veterinary Medicine in the city of Orlando, which opened the doors to a series of advances in the field, most importantly the once in a lifetime opportunity to obtain licensure in the State of Florida without having to go through all the steps of the ECFVF certification program described previously. Instead, they can get licensed if they pass the North American Veterinary Licensing Examination (NAVLE) which is the last step in the requirement sequence.

The statute also indicates applicants must submit documentation to the Florida Veterinary Board as proof of having graduated with a veterinary medicine degree, which must be verified first by the applicants' respective professional association in exile. This is another reason why the association was created.

AVVE (2020) requires each Venezuelan veterinarian wishing to obtain professional licensure the following documentation:

1. Affidavit application letter signed by the applicant.
2. Photocopy of the original diploma duly translated into English.
3. Photocopy of certified transcripts issued by the university from which the applicant graduated, specifying the credit hours taken in each subject, and grading scale duly translated into English.
4. Proof and reference of having legally practiced the profession for at least 3 years in Venezuela.

5. Proof of Florida Residency.
6. Proof the applicant left Venezuela for political reasons. This could be presented in an explanatory letter or asylum letter, specifying the dates of departure from Venezuela and entry to the USA coinciding with the I-94 entry form.

An affidavit is the written version of swearing under oath to tell the truth, just as if the person were testifying in a courtroom. Signing an affidavit containing false information can result in criminal penalties for the person signing, also called the affiant. All Venezuelan veterinarians who are applying for the licensure must ensure that the material they provide is correct and truthful. If the affidavit contains any arguments of the affiant's opinion or belief, it is important to state it explicitly (Haman, 2020).

According to AVVE (2020), there are approximately one hundred Venezuelan veterinarians residing in Florida. One of the eligibility requirements is the applicants must have fled Venezuela due to political reasons. In other words, those who left the country before the election of socialist president Hugo Chavez are ineligible to apply for this benefit. All participants I interviewed are eligible and four have taken the NAVLE in December 2020, the rest have planned dates in April 2021 and December 2021. They are allowed to retake the NAVLE examinations a maximum of three times.

In the following section, I present the secondary sources of information about refugees' career options in South Florida as provided by the director of Broward College's federal government funded career assistance program for refugees. Likewise, the Miami-Dade College refugees' education program coordinator provided information about the goals and mission of the program in terms of the careers and vocational options for refugees.

Introduction to Broward College Projects RENEW and RECAP

Broward County is located in the southeast of Florida. In 2018, Broward County had a population of 1.95 million. Forty-two percent of residents spoke a language other than English. The largest universities in Broward County are Broward College, with 12,856 degrees awarded in 2017, Nova Southeastern University with 6,845 degrees, and Keiser University-Ft Lauderdale with 4,678 degrees (Broward County, FL 2018).

For over 14 years, Broward College has served the refugee population in Broward County through Project RENEW. Project RENEW (Refugees Entering New Enterprises and Workforce) is a comprehensive program that delivers English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at no cost to qualifying refugees, asylees, and victims of human trafficking in Broward County (RENEW - Refugees Entering New Enterprises and Workforce, 2021).

According to the Broward College program director J. Martinez (personal communication, July, 8, 2020) in 2018, Project RECAP (Refugees Education Through Career and Academic Pathways) began after Broward College was awarded the Refugee Career Pathways grant. Both RENEW and RECAP programs are sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement. Only Venezuelans with an approved asylum immigration status are eligible for these programs.

Among the challenges refugees face to obtain meaningful employment is their lack of funding to pay for an educational program (short term or long term). Most refugee participants of Project RENEW and Project RECAP experience financial difficulties when they arrive and cannot afford the tuition for any educational program (technical/vocational or degree program). Depending on the participant's immigration status they may be eligible for federal financial aid (Garretson, 2019). Some Venezuelans with approved asylum status are receiving Federal Pell

Grant and are pursuing a degree in Broward College. Asylees or refugees with a bachelor's degree do not qualify for Federal Pell Grant. These refugees need RECAP's financial assistance to pay for courses to enhance and update their skills and become competitive in the job market (J. Martinez, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

The most common challenges for the Venezuelan and other refugee professionals to obtain meaningful employment in their professions are:

1. English Language skills
2. Work readiness and employability skills
3. Lack of funding for training and re-certification courses and exams
4. Lack of funding for prior degree's evaluation and translation

Some refugees do not have their official transcripts and it can be difficult to get certified copies directly from the granting institution (RECAP, n.d.).

I asked the program director how the program addressed improving refugees' work readiness and employability skills. J. Martinez (personal communication, October 27, 2020) illustrated her answer with an example. She explained that for instance, Project RECAP's Career Coach works with refugees on a one-on-one basis to help them tailor their resume for particular jobs, organize seminars to help students prepare for work fairs, assist them in completing job applications and develop and/or improve interviewing skills through mock interviews.

RECAP also has a prior learning evaluation program, tailored specifically for working adults, intended to give credit to what students have learned outside an academic setting. Prior learning credit can result from work experience, training programs, seminars, voluntary work, travel, military service or self-directed research. If, as a result of previous learning experiences, students have developed equivalent knowledge to Broward College course(s), demonstrate

competencies, and/or skills, they may be able to get academic credit through this evaluation program.

Out of the 12 participants only Estela took advantage of the career services Broward College provides to approved asylum seekers. Others had not even heard of this program, and the asylum seekers with pending cases knew about the program but, soon learned current policies establish they are not entitled to receive any service. Estela, through her sense of self-agency, optimistic outlook, and persistence set a goal for herself to get all the education, resources, and information she could get her hands on to be able to work in her field and pursued it relentlessly. She took advantage of the advanced English languages classes, did a certificate in Human Resource Development, contacted CareerSource Florida to prepare herself for her job search and obtained a meaningful job in her field.

J. Martinez (personal communication, October 27, 2020) shared some success stories of Venezuelan refugee professionals who received assistance from Broward College's RECAP Program. For many refugees it can be difficult to obtain official transcripts from higher education institutions in countries in turmoil as Venezuela.

Interestingly, the director perceived these as Venezuelan professional success stories, but except for a couple of refugees who are enrolled in master programs, the rest of the refugees are either on a career change path, waiting for official transcripts, i to obtain transcripts or are working in positions below their qualifications. However, those without their official transcripts are better off with the funds received from Broward College to further their education. Table 9 shows their demographics, foreign degrees, degree evaluation results, current employment and current professional development plans.

Table 9. Broward College Program RECAP Venezuelan Refugees/Asylees Success Stories

Gender	Age	Arrived US	Asylum Status Approved	Highest Educational Level from Native Country/Degree	Degree Evaluation Result - U.S. Equivalent Degree (Paid with RECAP Funds)	Employment and Education Plan
Female	34	2013	2016	Bachelor degree in Natural Resources and Environmental Engineering from Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho	Bachelor of Science in Environmental Engineering	Currently working for a Refugee Services Provider in Palm Beach County. Annual salary $13,000
Female	32	2013	2018	Licentiate in Law from Carabobo University	Transcripts and degree were translated for employment purposes.	Participants is pursuing a Master degree in Intercultural Human Rights at St. Thomas University. Currently working as Legal Assistant $15 per hour.
Male	31	2017	2018	BA Maritime Engineering from Maritime University of the Caribbean	Does not have the original transcript from her country. Completed a Project Management course.	Client intends to start a new career in Accounting. He completed the following courses at Broward College with the assistance of Project RECAP: Accounting course and Income taxes course. Client received a scholarship from the Broward College Continuing Education Department and completed the Executive Mini MBA Certificate program.
Male	23	2017	2018	Bachelor of Science in Systems Engineering from Bicentenary University of Aragua	Bachelor of Science in Systems Engineering	Interested in a career in Business Mgmt. Currently taking English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes at BC.

Table 9. Continued

Gender	**Age**	**Arrived US**	**Asylum Status Approved**	**Highest Educational Level from Native Country/Degree**	**Degree Evaluation Result - U.S. Equivalent Degree (Paid with RECAP Funds)**	**Employment and Education Plan**
Female	30	2017	2018	Industrial Engineering from Alonso de Ojeda University	Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering	With RECAP's Employment Coach is employed as a Residential Construction Supervisor for a Builder Company in South Florida. $20 per hour
Male	40	2017	2018	Licentiate in Fiscal Science with Specialty in Customs and Foreign Trade from the National School of Administration and Public Finance University	Bachelor of Science in Customs and International Business	Currently working as Warehouse clerk. With RECAP funds completed a Broward College CE course in International Trade Import/Export Business.
Male	36	2017	2018	BA Public Accounting from Universidad Rafael Belloso Chacin	Waiting to get original degree from his country to have it evaluated	Currently working at Amazon as Driver $16 per hour full-time. In the process to begin a Bookkeeping Certification program.
Female	34	2017	2018	BA in Economics from Universidad del Zulia	Does not have original transcripts to be evaluated	Works as Pharmaceutical Sale Representative Pfizer. With RECAP funds she is taking the Pharmaceutical Sale Representative certification course.
Female	33	2017	2018	BA in Advertising and Public Relations from Universidad del Zulia	BA of Science in Advertising and Public Relations	Currently working as Secretary for an Insurance company in South Florida. Interested in attaining the Florida Insurance Broker license.
Female	24	2018	2018	Licentiate in Psychology from Bicentennial University of Aragua	Broward College equivalence obtained Bachelor of Science in Psychology	Working as administrative assistant. Received RECAP assistance to enroll in a Master degree in Organizational Psychology at Florida Atlantic university.

The director explained that in Broward College, their focus is on helping refugees resume their careers successfully but also recognized many refugees lack employability skills for the Florida labor market. To remedy this situation, refugees provide personal advising from an experienced career coach to improve U.S. workplace skills.

Broward College funds the transcript and degree evaluations for refugees who have them, and for those who do not, Broward College performs a prior learning assessment to ultimately offer refugees an alternative career path or a career change. Irrespective of whether refugees have their transcripts, Broward College provides funding or assistance for refugees to further their education.

Miami Dade College REVEST Program

Miami Dade College (MDC) was funded in 1960 and today is one of the nation's largest and most diverse colleges and the largest in the state of Florida. Its education offerings include over 300 programs of study and several degree options, including vocational, associate and baccalaureate degrees (Miami Dade College, n.d.).

Given the constant influx of refugees to the area, and the need to meet the educational needs of this population as a critical marker for integration, the Refugee/Entrant Vocational Educational Services Training (REVEST) Program was created in 1999. The program is funded by the Florida Department of Children and Families, Office of Refugee Services (Miami Dade College, n.d.).

The REVEST Program is a comprehensive program of basic adult education, designed to improve the employability of refugees and asylees from all nationalities. The program is designed holistically to provide students a wide range of services, including and not limited to academic assessment, vocational advice, referrals to other service agencies; subsidies for

childcare, translation assistance and assessment of foreign credentials (up to 300 dollars). Eligible students can obtain all resources free of charge, including books and educational equipment. To date, REVEST has served about 60,000 asylees and refugees and in the 2018 school year it served 4,500 students, primarily from Cuba, Haiti and Venezuela (CCCIE, n.d.).

The REVEST program is well known for the emphasis placed on Vocational English for Speakers of Other Languages (VESOL), to increase their chances to enter the labor force. The program "serves as a steppingstone to semi-skilled interim or alternative careers, and prepares clients for employment and self-sufficiency" (MDC Revest, n.d., para. 3).

The program is tailored to the "vocational training needs of adult refugees, Cuban/Haitian entrants, political asylees, victims of human of trafficking, and Amerasians in the Miami-Dade County" (MDC Revest, n.d., para. 4). However, it is not the best option for refugees with a university degree and years of experience who much rather continue working in their fields. For instance, Georgina was the only participant who opted for a career change to the medical field, but she could not take advantage of the MDC REVEST program benefits because of her pending asylum court hearing. She had to fund the courses herself and did them at the Hollywood Career Institute, near her place of residence. The only problem with this institute is that students have the additional option of taking the courses in Spanish, or Creole, which is not the best choice for somebody who is trying to master the English language.

Chapter IV Summary

In this chapter I introduced the 12 participants, shared their stories of what prompted them to flee, their arrival and settlement, the respective attitudes to obtaining meaningful employment in their professions, and the credential recognition process. How hard they have worked to overcome systemic and cultural challenges to gain independence and reestablish their

professional identities or create new ones.

To answer the research questions, I presented a summarized version of each participant's story beginning with his/her education in Venezuela, work experience followed by barriers and facilitators and final thoughts about his/her experience as refugees in the U.S. In the key findings, I provided a detailed description of the emergent themes from the in-depth interviews and their corresponding findings. Tables with the themes and example quotes from refugees are provided as an illustration.

The case of Venezuelan veterinarians deserved its own section to explain what these professionals were able to achieve when they found a window of opportunity in the Florida veterinary medicine profession statutes for countries in conflict with the U.S. who had broken off diplomatic relations. With perseverance, these veterinarians explored the option, obtained legal representation, the lawyers prepared the case and presented it to the veterinary medicine licensing board and were successful. The board approved the petition and now these professionals can skip the long and costly revalidation process and only take the national veterinary test, the state regulations test, and get a doctor or veterinary medicine license in Florida.

The interviews with refugee education and career readiness program director and coordinator were useful in understanding the advantages and limitations of these programs for refugee in general and for refugee professionals in particular. Each college is focused on different segments of the refugee population. Their offerings include vocational paths, career change, employability skill development and career readiness training.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The results of the current study contribute to our understanding of how Venezuelan refugee professionals use their human and social capital to enter the labor market in Florida. It also highlights the barriers and facilitators they come across in their attempts to resume their careers. More specifically, I identified the role of social capital available to these refugees and discovered a perspective concerning the types of support that affected them at different stages of their labor-market integration process. I found refugees had access to linking, bonding, and bridging social capital, which offered support such as drafting resumes and getting employment referrals. Social capital also helped this population find living-wage jobs during the lengthy wait for a work permit. I highlighted the case of Venezuelan veterinarians who reached out to colleagues to inform them about the newly founded Association of Venezuelan Veterinarians in Exile and the goals it had to help them achieve state licensure, an exception to the norm. A point worth highlighting is the bridging efforts of the Cuban veterinarians, whose guidance and advice played a decisive role in the accomplishments of their Venezuelan colleagues.

Drawing from this data analysis, some main findings related to human capital emerged. First, Venezuelan refugee professionals had expectations about human capital, in terms of their careers and experience. Although they were aware they needed to make sacrifices in the beginning, they also thought once their English improved, their career capital would eventually serve them well. However, this was not always the case. The credentials of these individuals were not recognized, and a long and costly road was ahead of them regarding the revalidation of their degrees.

In addition, one unexpected contextual facilitator for employment had to do with the fact they could speak Spanish. Refugees had expressed a desire to resettle in South Florida, which is known as a melting pot of Spanish-speaking people from Latin America. Such a locale made their overall adaptation easier, but the fact employers considered speaking Spanish an asset was unanticipated.

The Singular Case of Venezuelan Refugee Professionals

After the interviews with the participants, it became evident from their stories that asylum-seeking professionals who are Venezuelan differ from the majority of asylum seekers from other countries, as noted earlier. As the participants said, most Venezuelans arrive at the Miami airport with visitor and business visas, unlike Central Americans, for example, who attempt to enter illegally through the Mexico border, often turning themselves in to U.S. border security officers, although there have been recent attempts by Venezuelans to cross the Texas border. In general, Venezuelans who come to Miami are wealthier and have greater access to solid legal representation, dramatically improving their probability of being able to stay. All 12 of the study participants had legal representation to help them navigate the immigration landscape.

Important allies to the Venezuelan cause are Cuban refugees, who are one of the most known examples of a privileged context of reception. The first migrants were white professionals and business people who received a warm welcome from the U.S. government and the American public (Portes & Borocz, 1989). The mixture of professional and entrepreneurial experiences gained a favorable reception and resulted in the development of a vibrant ethnic economy that continues to thrive today. Additionally, Venezuelans have the support of Cuban politicians and lawmakers in South Florida, as these individuals see them as natural allies in the regional fight

against leftist regimes in Latin America (Faiola & Miroff, 2018).

Venezuelans have more advantages due to the history of Venezuelans in this area of the U.S. According to Schwartz, et al. (2018), since the late 1990s and early 2000s, Weston (Broward County) and Doral (Miami-Dade County) in South Florida have been home to a significant number of affluent Venezuelan professionals and business executives who emigrated when Hugo Chávez became president. This may have triggered a more positive view of Venezuelans and a more welcoming attitude toward the recent Venezuelan exodus, because it challenges the common misconception about refugees as low class and/or uneducated. Weston, also known as Westonzuela, is one of the municipalities in Broward and has become a safe haven with potential opportunities for Venezuelan exiles whose economic dreams have been crushed, and whose lives are threatened under the present leftist regime in Venezuela. In fact, more than half of the participants reside in this area.

Despite the apparent facilitators for Venezuelan refugees and asylum seekers in South Florida, the international community has not provided enough funds or attention to Venezuela's situation. The main reason for this is that the 1951 Refugee Convention says recognition of migrants as refugees requires a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (Fuscoe, 2019, p. 191).

Most of the countries affected by the crisis in Venezuela adopted the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which defines refugees in broader terms as persons "who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order" (UNHCR, 1984, p. 36).

Despite most states agreeing to adopt this convention as a way to expedite and simplify the process of determining refugee status and approval, only Brazil and Mexico have implemented it. As for the United States, asylum petitions from Venezuela account for a large percentage, but fewer than 10% of applicants have been recognized as refugees (Van Praag, 2019).

Some of the participants I interviewed had enough grounds to be considered refugees while still in Venezuela. For instance, Antonio's case was highly publicized not only for the government's violation of private property laws, but also for the fierce and violent persecution he and his family had to endure. Yet Antonio could not get protection from UNHCR and had to make arrangements on his own. To be fair, the U.S. immigration officer who interviewed Antonio approved his asylum petition right away, which is uncommon. In another example, Georgina, who was victim of a vicious physical attack during a protest and had to have one of her kidneys surgically removed after sustaining irreversible damage, could not get UNHCR to help her flee to another country for her safety. Instead, she had to rely on her relatives in the U.S. to help her leave and provide shelter.

Designation of Venezuela for Temporary Protection Status (TPS)

Not all lawmakers and politicians are indifferent to Venezuela's crippling political and humanitarian crisis. After personally witnessing what years of corruption, mismanagement, oppression, and autocracy did to destroy the Venezuelan economy and democracy, New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, supported by Judiciary Committee Chair Dick Durbin of Illinois and Senators Patrick Leahy of Vermont, Cory Booker of New Jersey, and Marco Rubio of Florida, introduced the Venezuela Temporary Protected Status Act of 2021, legislation that grants temporary protection status for eligible

Venezuelans to live and work legally in the U.S. (H.R. 161, 2021).

The senators tried to pass this legislation five times during 18 months of President Donald Trump's term, but it was blocked every time (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020). Unexpectedly, on the last day of his term, Trump signed an executive order for a Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) for eligible Venezuelans who were lawfully in the U.S. prior to January 20, 2021. President Joe Biden promoted the TPS as he had publicly promised to do within his first 100 days in office, and with the Democrat majority, the legislation passed. Unlike DED, TPS is based on legal statute and has proven to be more durable across administrations. A TPS for Venezuelans eliminates the year-long waiting period to be able to submit a job permit application.

Recently, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas formally announced the TPS designation of Venezuela for 18 months, beginning in March and ending in September of 2022, with a high probability of an extension (USCIS, 2021). Asylum seekers who have introduced their petitions in recent months can apply for TPS concurrently and get their work permits faster.

This illustrates, in part, the impact a conflict between countries which have broken off diplomatic relations can have on refugees and asylum seekers. In the case of Venezuelans, it worked in their favor from an immigration perspective, but its reach can be life-changing for refugee professionals' careers. For now, until policies change, it is critical to review the state statutes by profession and search for any mention of an exception for countries in conflict with the U.S. The achievement of Venezuela veterinarians was the best example and set a precedent in the state.

Implications for HRD

The study of the career experiences of qualified refugee professionals benefits the research and practice of human resource development. With appropriate strategies, HRD can assist employers in overcoming the obstacles qualified refugees face and facilitate their career development. However, as described in previous chapters, the careers of refugees in the professions for which they are trained, are subject to the environment of opportunities, constraints, immigration laws, and regulations of the host society. In other words, host societies hold labor-entry barriers specific to refugees rather than encouraging capable and educated refugees to seek better economic prospects on their own.

Previous research has established most asylum seekers come from different circumstances compared to economic migrants, who are mainly motivated by economic factors or the need to increase their standard of living (Iredale, 2001; Richmond, 2002; Chiswick & Miller, 2009). Refugees did not leave voluntarily or had ample time for planning and preparing for their move, but rather were forced to leave due to strenuous and life-threatening circumstances with little or no preparation. Also, they face the burden of having to prove to authorities that they fulfill the legal description of a refugee. Furthermore, since they have not been declared as refugees by UNHCR, they do not obtain loans to fund their journeys to the United States. Moreover, since asylees are often unable to travel with their entire family, the reunification of relatives can take time.

On arrival, asylum seekers are not eligible for public aid or benefits, as opposed to sponsored refugees. They are also forced to rely on others for free or low-cost accommodations and may fall into unsustainable and even violent conditions. Some asylum seekers arrive and simply have nowhere to go; others are held in immigration detention facilities when they arrive

and some are only released after immigration authorities approve their asylum applications (Harris, 2016).

The role and effort of HRD as a change agent should first be aimed at the more macro, national level by influencing refugees' policy reforms, especially when these individuals are skilled and/or hold professional degrees. Facilitating their entrance into the job market through training and development opportunities would prevent the depreciation of their human capital and enhance their careers, which is critical for any nation's economy and growth.

National Human Resource Development (NHRD) and U.S. Policies

Shuck, et al. (2018) describe careers as important and inextricably linked to people's identities. Many individuals are passionate about their jobs, which can give them a sense of pride. Simply having a job can offer opportunities for advancement within any given profession. However, in today's ever-changing, complex, and turbulent world, many organizations and HRD duties have relegated Career Development (CD) to a less prominent position. Furthermore, organizations may be unable to participate in CD or unsure of how to promote CD activities. They may simply leave it to the employees to develop their own careers, which could lead to attrition through negligence. Moreover, such negligent behavior extends beyond organizations and into the U.S. immigration system, directly affecting the "economic well-being in a world of increasing fluctuations in job security often marked by periods of unemployment and underemployment and widening inequalities in income" (p. 5) of refugee professionals, as well as limited opportunities and options for career advancement.

HRD practitioners and scholars have a moral obligation to participate in and influence public policy decisions. More effort is required to ensure public policies encourage career advancement. HRD professionals and academics must make their best efforts to better influence

and advise those who implement public policy, which affects workers' careers (Shuck, et al., 2018), especially refugee professionals in the U.S., a country that historically has been the host nation to millions of these individuals. Similarly, Wang & Swanson (2008) proposed "from a theory development perspective, it is logical and methodologically consistent to categorize current NHRD research as HRD policy studies" (p. 96), recommending policy reform and influencing decision-making in the U.S.

Inconsistencies within refugee policy and subpar career-development support are due to a lack of a centralized body overseeing international credential recognition, which inevitably undermines refugees who are seeking to restart their careers in the U.S. Cho & McLean (2004) went a step further and claimed "the United States does not have a clear vision of its national human resource development, and multiple agencies (perhaps as many as 125) overlap in offering uncoordinated aspects of NHRD" (p. 391).

CD and HRD must expand their boundaries beyond their usual focus of research. CD is making inroads into mainstream policy formulation by tackling "major labor market and workforce issues, and is beginning to look at the changing nature of work, more socially inclusive CD practices, lifelong learning and global career development" (Cameron, 2009, p. 13).

Strengthening CD as a pillar of HRD

It is widely recognized by HRD scholars that CD has been understudied and has not received the attention expected about one of the three foundational pillars of HRD (Egan et al., 2006; Hite & McDonald, 2008; Hite & McDonald, 2008; Cameron, 2009; McDonald & Hite, 2014). McDonald & Hite (2014) posit HRD and CD researchers have worked independently while Cameron (2009) claims it is the era of CD and the time and for HRD and CD to make joint

efforts to address issues in an interdisciplinary manner.

Many regions and individual countries are fully aware of the imminent need to influence and promote career development and career guidance public policy reforms. For instance, in 2004 the International Center for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP) was founded with the goal of promoting international policy sharing and learning from the experience and expertise of several countries around the world. It provides information and research findings to policymakers, academics, and career development professionals alike. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the European Commission, international professional associations, and government officials from several individual countries, international policy reviews revealed the urgent need to strengthen the synergies among "policies for education, training, employment, and social inclusion, as well as career guidance services" (ICCDPP, 2015, para. 1).

The primary reason for policy interest in career development is that it impacts both public and private sectors. CD is not only useful to the individual but also to society as a whole. The advantages of CD policy have traditionally been classified into two groups; economic efficiency in human resource allocation and utilization and social equity in terms of marginalized populations gaining access to educational and vocational opportunities to enter the labor market. CD programs may play an important role in improving the expectations and increasing the chances of people who are at a disadvantage due to their gender, race, disabilities social class background, or refugee status (Watts, 2000). HRD career development specialists "can encourage policymakers to use theory and research findings to assess the impact of current practices and to generate new policies" (Savickas, 2000, para. 1)

Furthermore, the career paradigm has shifted and is no longer based on the orderly

advancement within an organizational or professional hierarchy, but rather defines the lifetime growth of the individual in learning and work. Individuals must create their own professional identities as part of a process of reflection connecting personal with societal transformation (Watts, 2000).

One benefit of CD interventions supported by policy reforms lies in the assistance these can provide to individuals in developing self-awareness about where they might be adequate and fulfilled employees. Evidence also supports the usefulness of training in job-seeking skills to people; all participants voiced this concern and confirmed they had to rely on their social network to assist them. More inclusive policy reforms can also help nations by lowering unemployment, increasing GDP, and re-energizing discouraged employees (Savickas, 2000).

According to International Monetary Fund's Fernandez & Guajardo (2019) most recent analysis, Venezuelan migration has the potential to boost GDP growth in recipient countries by 0.1 to 0.3 percentage points between 2017 and 2030. As an illustration, a recent study by the World Bank (2020) claims the majority of Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador are young and highly educated and they could boost the country's GDP by up to 2% if and when they are given access to jobs and income commensurate with their educational level. Policies such as increased assistance for education and workforce integration might assist migrants find better-paying employment and, in turn, help stimulate development and growth in receiving nations. This is another reason why a national CD policy reform can have far-reaching impact in the U.S., when it comes to refugees professionals.

Career services during the Covid-19 pandemic: A survey of 93 countries

Given the global devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on labor markets, career development services have never been more important. In an initiative to address and learn about

the impact of the pandemic, the European Centre for Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), the European Commission (EC), the European Training Foundation (ETF), International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), joined forces and carried out an international survey with the participation of 93 countries, following the declaration of the world Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020.

The main objective of the survey was to learn how career guidance policies, systems and services were adapting and coping. Their findings revealed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to fulfill the needs of people who had lost their employment or been laid off, there was an increase in demand for career advice services throughout the world, particularly about labor market information, job-search help, and education and training options. Individuals accessed these career services through the use of technology. On the other hand, vulnerable populations had difficulty receiving career services including elderly persons, persons with special needs, rural communities, migrants, and refugees due to access issues. Future policy initiatives should address the growing need for career services as well as the need to offer both access and accessible programs to support these disadvantaged populations as the pandemic exposed the increased difficulties these groups face. Some of the U.S. disadvantaged populations also experienced similar access issues, unfortunately the U.S. participation in this survey was minimal. The participants in the survey included career counselors, career development practitioners, policy officials, including policy official or government advisors, program administrators or managers of career services. “The majority of respondents work in public organizations or in organizations that are publicly funded” (Cedefop, EC, ETF, ICCDPP, ILO,

OECD, UNESCO, 2021, p.14).

In summary, HRD must refocus on CD in the face of such significant changes, examine this wavering career environment, respond to the diverse needs of individuals, systems, nations and address necessary policy reforms (Hite & McDonald, 2008).

Discussion

Human capital theory has been vital for this analysis of the career experiences of Venezuelan refugee professionals. The theory is based on an economic model that alludes to immigrants, who, unlike refugees, were not displaced or forced to leave. Nonetheless, it is also applicable to refugees for after all, it is based on the approach and personal agency these refugee professionals use to take advantage of their human capital in the community where they resettle and in their new society as a whole (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). However, this perception begins to change when refugee professionals start to reevaluate their initial assessment of the value of their human capital triggered by the responses and feedback they get from their new surroundings, starting with the uphill battle for credential recognition.

Regarding the issue of skill gaps, some of the participants recognized the need for improved expertise and skills in order to use advanced technologies in the U.S., as a result of increasing technological progress in the developed world compared to Venezuela. The veterinarians were particularly aware of the advancements in technology in veterinary medicine, and despite being hired as veterinary assistants, which was below their qualification level, such jobs presented unique opportunities to learn and improve their skills. In addition, they felt these jobs could help them overcome the challenge posed by the lack of work experience often required for better positions in the U.S. (Van Ngo & Este, 2006).

In her thorough analysis of the foreign credential process in the U.S., Rabben (2013)

exposed the disjointed assortment of roles states, regulatory and professional boards, and higher education institutions play in the procedure, making it difficult to understand and harder to navigate. She describes the different roles as follows:

1. Professional associations and accreditation bodies play intimidating gatekeeper roles in this complex system.
2. Professional associations usually help trace the road to professional certification.
3. The state establishes professional licensing and oversight boards.
4. At the same time, professional organizations may manage and supervise the boards' activities.
5. Some private and public higher education institutions provide training toward certification, often receiving funds from the federal government, as in the case with Broward College and Miami-Dade College.
6. Companies that offer credential evaluation and translation services to determine the U.S. equivalency may be nonprofit or for-profit. In Florida in particular, these companies must be registered with the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). The problem is these companies follow the association's general guidelines, but they are also allowed to establish their own evaluation criteria. As reported by Broward College's director, there is no special pricing or discounts for refugees or for Broward College (J. Martinez, personal communication, October 27, 2020).
7. Finally, unions receive federal funding and offer apprenticeships. Candidates must usually complete a pre-apprenticeship training program offered at community colleges, universities, high schools, vocational training centers, and some unions directly.

The intricate process Rabben (2013) attempted to decipher is only the beginning in terms of identifying the players, the options, the costs, and the feasibility of a successful credential revalidation. Thus, “foreign-trained professionals may require years of special help to navigate this cumbersome system. As a result, many foreign-trained professionals who want to practice in the United States do not manage to attain their goal” (p. 3). The best example of this from my dissertation is the Venezuelan veterinarians. At least five participants expressed their frustration with the complexity and the costs associated with obtaining their licenses and admitted that if it had not been for the work of the association, they probably would have given up hope of attaining their professional license in Florida. Therefore, the question remains: How many other professions have similar exceptions in their statutes which have not been pursued with the same resolve as the Venezuelan veterinarians? If veterinary medicine, a regulated profession, has this exception, it is likely other professions do as well, and many refugee professionals may be missing out on an outstanding opportunity. Next, I address the unexpected finding I reported in chapter IV.

An Unexpected Finding

As I mentioned previously, an unexpected finding was that the group reported the term ‘refugee’ had a negative connotation in their environment, therefore, they opted to reject the refugee designation as an element of their new identities, and instead preferred the asylee or asylum seeker designation. Since neither of the theoretical frameworks I used in this dissertation provides an explanation for this finding, I opted to present the theories which may shed some light on the negative stereotype assigned to the term refugee in Florida.

Kotzur (2017) posits the terms "refugees" and "asylum seekers" are commonly used to describe persons who have been forced to leave their homeland due to dangerous living

situations. It is common for people to evaluate groups based on labels, including “perceived morality, stigma, and power, as well as social class and status” (Kotzur, et al., 2017, p. 227). In the same vein, language is the instrument individuals use to construct meaning, and it shapes their perceptions of the world, which includes stereotypes and biases, and has a significant influence on how people perceive social groups.

Fiske et al. (2002) Stereotype Content Model (SCM) evaluates social groupings on two essential characteristics, the first and most fundamental stereotype content component, warmth, is connected to likability and trustworthiness and involves the assessment of how much a social group typically poses a danger to the ingroup's aims; affable vs. damaging or high vs. low warmth. Competence is the second dimension. Competence is related to efficacy and independence, and it refers to the ability and capacity to act on these intentions; capable vs. incapable or high vs. low competence (Durante, 2008; Kotzur, et al., 2017) . According to Fiske et al. (2002) stereotypes result from shared public views of groups and both individuals and social groups are categorized according to their level of warmth and competence.

In the refugee and immigrant context, a theoretical framework deserving attention is the Integrated Threat Theory of Prejudice which attributes prejudice, negative stereotypes and attitudes to perceived intergroup threats. These threats are classified in 4 categories, “realistic threats for example threats to the host community’s economy, symbolic threats to values and beliefs, negative stereotypes about immigrants being aggressive or lazy, and intergroup anxiety or feeling personally threatened or embarrassed by intergroup interactions” (Esses et al., 2017, p. 82).

In the specific case of Florida, a state known for receiving a constant influx of refugees, perceived threats may have triggered the negative stereotype the group reported about refugees

in their communities. Again, language has a major impact on the perception of social groups (Kotzur, et al., 2017). Additionally, politicians frequently use the implications of perceived danger and competition from migrants in their campaigns. For instance, former U.S., President Donald Trump urged his supporters to be cautious and to protect themselves against Syrian migrants entering the country.

Esses et al. (2017) argue the effect of political identification on immigration restrictions in the United States is highly dependent on the size of the immigrant population. Political ideology, specifically, does not favor nor support immigration restrictions in areas where the immigrant population is small, not the case of Florida. Furthermore, when refugees are welcome publicly, supported by the government, and presented in a positive light in the media, the perceived threat decreases, and host community members' views improve. In the next section, I provide the recommendations that have emerged from this work.

Recommendations

It is more imperative now than ever before to be more agile and efficient when dealing with the placement of refugees, not only because various refugee crises continue to emerge around the world, but also because of the drastic changes in U.S. refugee policies from the last administration to the new one. During the 2020 fiscal year, the Trump administration slashed the number of refugees who were eligible to be admitted into the U.S. down to 18,000; in 2021 the number was reduced further to15,000. In contrast, President Biden pledged to increase the cap of admitted refugees to 62,500, starting on October 1, 2021 (Amos, 2020).

In addition, on February 4, 2021, President Biden issued an executive order for improving and rebuilding programs to resettle refugees and plan for the impact of climate change on migration. Executive order 14,013 (2021) section 1 (i) states:

> To meet the challenges of restoring and expanding USRAP, the United States must innovate, including by effectively employing technology and capitalizing on community and private sponsorship of refugees, while continuing to partner with resettlement agencies for reception and placement (para. 10).

USRAP is the United States Refugee Admission Program, which experienced significant downsizing and reorganization during Donald Trump's administration. This may be the reason for the use of the phrase 'restore and expand' when referring to USRAP. Furthermore, the inclusion of technology as a way to improve the refugee resettlement process is also evident in the language used in the executive order.

Some propositions to improve refugee resettlement in the U.S., through technology are in the works from various fronts. HRD professionals with their expertise can play a significant role in advising the policy decision makers. Technology is a critical component of professional growth and the career development specialist has to be a technologist, able to make recommendations, plan and implement the use of computer-assisted career guidance systems, virtual reality, self-assessment, manage international databases about educational and occupational opportunities, and other forms of technology to supplement individual, organizational, and national needs (Herr, 2001). Next, I describe one of these noteworthy propositions; the Annie Moore central smart data platform for refugees.

Annie Moore central smart data platform for refugees

In an effort to take advantage of technology to enhance refugee resettlement, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) joined forces with the University of Oxford in England, the University of Lund in Sweden, and the Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) in Massachusetts to develop a software package designed for resettlement agencies to assist them in providing more efficient refugee placement. As placement procedures stand now, and due to a lack of an

integrated data platform, case workers do not have the technological capacities to access, collect, and analyze historical information to be able to match refugees' skills and education with locations in the U.S., where there is a high demand for their skills and abilities. Instead, case workers end up assigning refugees to the first available location, which may not be the best match for refugees and their families.

Scialabba, et al. (2021) propose a technology-based smart data platform to remedy the fragmentation of the refugee resettlement process in the U.S. This solution approaches the problem at the macro level and attempts to get to the core of the issue. The lack of connection among the different agencies and entities responsible for resettlement of refugees, each of which works on a different system and software platform, cannot communicate or exchange crucial information. But a singular platform would streamline and transform and improve the refugee resettlement process in the U.S.

Samber (2012) explains the result of this effort stems from the creation of Annie Moore, or the Annie software program, which was named in honor of the first registered immigrant at the Port of New York in Ellis Island in 1892. The acronym of Annie's last name, MOORE, in the program stands for Matching and Outcome Optimization for Refugee Empowerment. According to the researchers, refugees should live where they have the best chance of finding work, being self-sufficient, and adjusting to their new lives.

Scialabba, et al. (2021) make an important point about how the software program could benefit refugee professionals. They argue a smart resettlement platform will make work-placement decisions by connecting refugees with jobs in demand based on their skill sets and qualifications, as well as by screening out employers who do not hire or are unable to recruit

refugees. Without this information, advanced-degree credentials may be overlooked, preventing refugees from being considered for high-skill jobs for which they may be eligible.

Since many cities in the United States are in dire need of both qualified and low-skilled labor, this imbalance in expertise and needs represents a significant potential deficit for both refugees and their new society. When refugees can share their skills, it strengthens their integration into the community. “This software helps place refugees in suitable homes based on prior employment, language support, and nationality” (Scialabba, et al., 2021, p. 8).

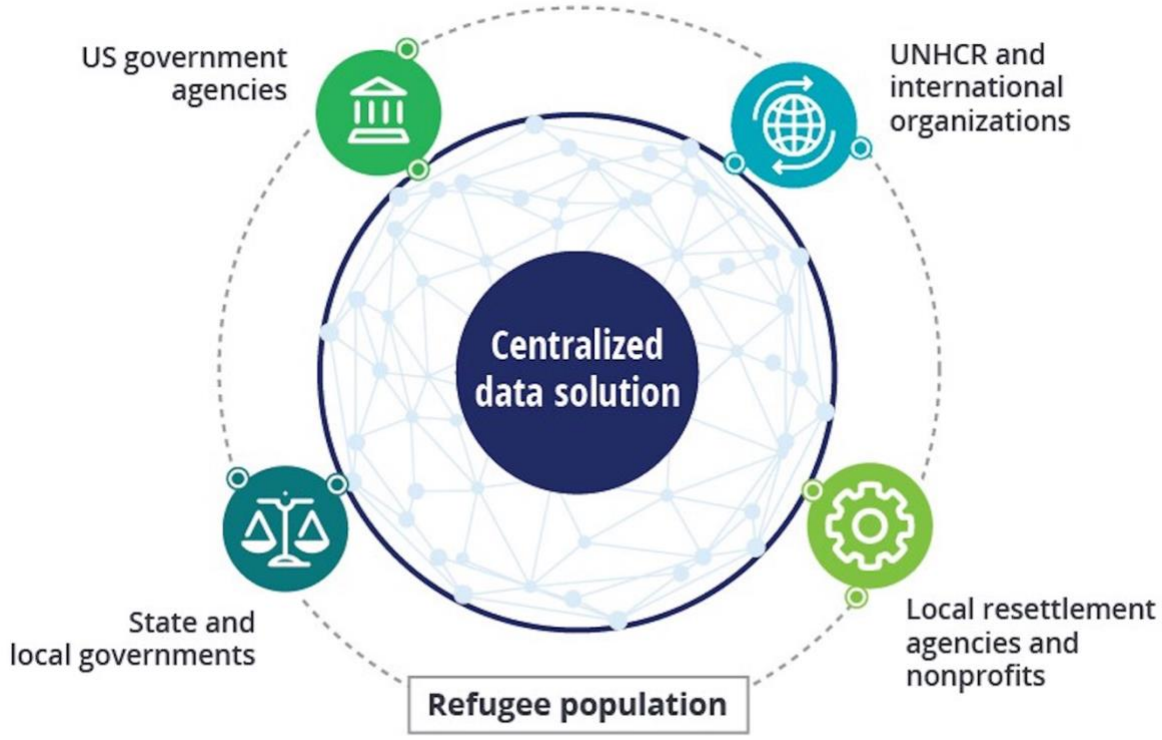
The first Annie software program was launched in May of 2018, and since then the developers have continued to make improvements to its design and capabilities. HIAS members presented Annie to the U.S. Department of State, which signals the unit is open to exploring options to improve the immigration process. This means there is a chance Annie, or a similar platform, may be adopted in the future.

The position of President Biden regarding refugees may give the Annie Moore software, or another similar program, the chance to transform the resettlement process. Perhaps the beginning of this transformation will lead to much-needed improvements in the credential recognition process of refugee professionals. Scialabba, et al. (2021) assert refugee resettlement organizations can exchange and access information by linking technological resources through a single data portal, as shown in Figure 6, enabling them to collaborate to reduce disruption points in the resettlement process, strengthen procedures, and help resettle refugees in the best possible manner.

Given the impact research can have on public policy and the expertise of HRD practitioners bring as promoters of economic development and workforce development, it is imperative HRD also plays this role for the disadvantaged and marginalized populations; such as

refugees professionals, who face multiple barriers, including access to education or retraining at the regional and national levels (Alagaraja & Githens, 2016).

Figure 6. A Smart Resettlement Platform Could Improve Integration Outcomes



From "Smart Refugee Resettle A Smart Resettlement Platform Could Improve Integration Outcomes," by L. Scialabba, J. Kits, J. Eberle, J. Craft, and R. Nek, 2021, Deloitte Insights. (https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/technology-refugee-resettlement.html). Reprinted with permission.

Centralized database for foreign credential evaluation and recognition

The U.S. is a federal republic, and the federal government does not evaluate foreign degrees, diplomas, or credit transfer. It operates with a decentralized system of education; as such, no government entity is responsible for tracking educational qualification evaluations

obtained abroad for immigrants or refugees. However, this was not always the case. Campbell (2018) affirms that between World War I and 1970, the United States' federal government handled credential examinations directly. Under the auspices of the Office of Education, the Foreign Credential Evaluation Service (FCES), was the entity responsible for providing free evaluations of foreign educational credentials. In 1969, FCES conducted about 20,000 evaluations. The Office of Education later became the US Department of Education. To replace FCES and transfer this responsibility to the states the foreign credential evaluation private companies emerged and operate under the guidance of the U.S. Network for Education Information (USNEI).

The U.S. Network for Education Information (USNEI) provides guidance on foreign qualifications for educators, students, and administrators. Additionally, it publishes comparability statements to assist in how international credentials relate to those in the United States. Approximately half of the participants mentioned the absence of a centralized database with information for professionals seeking to obtain the equivalence of their qualifications as a major roadblock. Relying on word of mouth is not always accurate and may cause unnecessary delays when trying for accreditation.

The Netherlands and Denmark offer examples of countries with a well-coordinated approach to formal foreign credential recognition for refugee professionals (Schuster, et al. 2013). In the Netherlands, the Dutch organization for Internationalization in Education for Vocational and Higher Education Research and Adult Education (Nuffic), and the Foundation for Cooperation in Vocational Education, Training and the Labor Market (SBB) created the Information Centre of Expertise for International Credential Evaluation (IDW). The IDW provides foreign credential evaluation. Individuals who want to have their academic or

vocational degrees evaluated must put in the request to the center. The organization's website, available to read in Dutch and English, provides information about regulated and non-regulated professions and has contact information (Nuffic, n.d.).

The Danish Agency for University and Internationalization (DAUI), a unit under the Danish Ministry of Education and Science, is a centralized agency responsible for the assessment of foreign credentials for education and employment purposes. If the evaluation request is for employment, the agency issues a certified assessment of the skills and qualifications of individuals. The agency gives the employer the freedom to evaluate the prospective employee's skills to ensure the qualifications meet the specific job requirements. Refugee professionals can use this assessment for multiple employers, and it is free of charge (Danish Ministry of Education and Science, 2020).

The Netherlands and Denmark are small countries compared to the U.S., but in their models, the centralized entity does the assessment and local counties or municipalities make the final decision. Theoretically, the same process could be applied in the U.S. The federal government's designated central agency could do the evaluation, issue the results, and transfer the final decision to the states, licensing boards for regulated professions, or even to prospective employers. Such solutions would translate into major benefits for the U.S., and for professionals seeking to get the equivalence of their qualifications while preventing their human capital to depreciate further.

Limitations

This case study provides valuable insights concerning the barriers and facilitators of refugees' human and social capital with some limitations. First, the unit of analysis is limited to one group of Venezuelan refugee professionals in South Florida. Refugees from various ethnic

origins may exhibit varying occupational behaviors and experience varying hurdles and/or facilitators. The distinct characteristics of the labor market context in South Florida, where a population of over 52 percent of Venezuelan immigrants and refugees reside, may also influence refugees' job-searching strategies. By confining the sample to the South Florida labor market, I am unable to give insights on variations in refugee behavior in other states.

Secondly, because I chose to limit the sample to refugees who successfully entered the U.S. labor market, I cannot offer insights regarding the experiences of newly arrived Venezuelan refugee professionals who have yet to find a job in South Florida, or those who chose a different career trajectory voluntarily or were forced by circumstances beyond their control and were still successful. An inter-group comparison might improve the knowledge of the employment of various or other strategies, and even reveal elements of entrepreneurship. Previous research suggests entrepreneurship "can help refugees integrate into the local social and economic fabric of the host country" (Shneikat, & Alrawadieh, 2019, p. 757).

Future Research Directions

My findings provide several points of departure for future research. First, while social capital is a regularly utilized job-search strategy for refugee professionals, I am unsure whether other groups choose this method based on their refugee experiences or continue to search for employment in the same way they did in their home countries. The Venezuelan refugee professionals, except for drafting a résumé tailored to the U.S., used the same job-search strategies they used in Venezuela, where social relationships and connections are used heavily to attain jobs, and where the recruitment process can sometimes be more informal than in the U.S. Moreover, another important next step would be to conduct research on the integration processes of refugee professionals in other communities in Florida, in other states or at more advanced

stages of their careers.

Another area of research would be identifying possible differences in how refugees with professions in the medical field use their accumulated human capital and social capital. This would be incredibly beneficial given the consensus among researchers that "physician services will significantly outpace the supply of physicians within the United States of America from 2017 to 2030, causing many states to face severe physician workforce shortage" (Zhang, et al., 2020, p. 4). When the shortage begins to affect the medical sector, will the federal government begin to reevaluate the credentialing process and explore different venues to facilitate licensing options for foreign-trained physicians?

As for nurses, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "11 million additional nurses are needed to avoid a further shortage. Employment opportunities for nurses are projected to grow at a faster rate (15%) than all other occupations from 2016 through 2026" (Haddad, et al., 2020, para. 2).

This case study lays the groundwork for more research into the types of assistance human and social capital can offer refugees and other newcomers, and how to best use them. Further research with other communities could make it possible to overcome some of the shortcomings in this study by expanding the research to include other national and ethnic refugee communities. Researchers could consider undertaking longitudinal studies of clusters of refugee professionals to learn how their careers progress over time.

Conclusion

Non-recognition of foreign degrees, unfair conditions and requirements in the accreditation process, a lack of U.S.-based work experience, cultural differences, and biased policies in the U.S. labor market are all reasons for the low rates of full economic integration

when it comes to refugees. Refugee professionals experience a significant reduction in earning power when their careers are interrupted, and this situation worsens when the duration of the interruption is long. If we add the non-recognition of their credentials and the lack of coherent national and state plans to facilitate the resumption of their careers, the result will be the depreciation of refugees' human capital (Mincer & Ofek, 1982).

In order to take advantage of the talent, experience, and opportunities refugees offer, countries must build encouraging conditions that provide stability and predictability, allowing newcomers to invest in their own human capital. A shared international mechanism would help ensure the rights and security of refugees are influenced by a wider understanding of the rights of forced or displaced refugees. Moreover, public-private collaborations can help promote skills training and jobs to support integration. These supporting strategies have a twofold purpose: provide meaningful jobs for refugee professionals and benefit the host country's economy (Bahar & Dooley, 2020). HRD in general and CD in particular play a pivotal role in supporting all these options, researching others possibilities and providing public policy reform recommendations.

> "HRD has to become a partner in the struggles of the world to promote core aspirations of fostering a sustainable environment in which the needs of people are balanced and in which no one group or interest takes precedence at the expense of another, and in which the value of each element to the whole is recognized" (Lee, 2007, p. 108).

Lastly, the participants' stories showed extraordinary resilience and determination in the face of the obstacles and hardships they faced as refugees. While they recognize challenges may interfere with their aspirations, this group of individuals remains focused on coping as they pursue their professional growth and integration in their new society.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Venezuelan Refugee Professionals in South Florida: Barriers and Facilitators for Employment and Career Development in their professions

(Date)

Dear [Participant's Name]

My name is Deyanira Garcia. I am a PhD student at Texas A&M University. I would like to invite you to take part in my research project. The focus is on the career experiences of Venezuelan refugee professionals in South Florida.

(Person, refugee/asylee organization, professional organization) recommended I invite you to take part of my research. I seek to find out how Venezuelan refugee professionals enter the labor market in their fields. In the United States, Venezuelan asylum requests have reached an all-time high with no signs of slowing down.

If you agree, we may select you to take part in the in-depth study. The study involves a 60 to 90-minute interview with you. Your information will be confidential and there will be no way for anyone to identify you from any results reported in this study. We will not share your comments with other participants, and you can refuse to answer questions and still continue to take part. A 30-minute follow-up phone interview may also be necessary to ensure we preserve your responses for proper analysis, and that I correctly captured the meaning of what you said. With your permission I would like to audio record our interview.

If it interests you to learn more about the study or if you have questions, please call me at [redacted], or email me at [redacted]

Sincerely,

Deyanira Garcia Zea

IRB2020-0070M

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, you can contact the Office of Research Compliance, at (979) 458-1467.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Case Study of Venezuelan Refugee Professionals in South Florida: Barriers and Facilitators for Employment in their Professions

Pre-settlement questions

1. Can you tell me about your particular situation in Venezuela and what led you to seek refugee status?

Resettlement questions

1. What were some thoughts and feelings that you had about coming to the U.S.?
2. What were some of the worries you had?

Career experience questions

Home country experience

Please describe your professional experience in Venezuela.

Probe: What degree(s) did you obtain in Venezuela?

Probe: Did you study English in Venezuela? If yes, what was your level of English when you came to the U.S?

Host country experience

Please tell me about your professional experience in the United States in regards to using your professional credentials.

How was the process of finding employment?

Did you have personal connections, family or relatives in the area where you settled?

Additional questions

What are some challenges that you believe other Venezuelan refugee professionals may encounter when trying to get a job in the U.S.?

What advice would you give to other Venezuelan asylum seeker professionals?

Is there anything else that we should have talked about, but did not?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Venezuelan Refugee Professionals in South Florida: Barriers and Facilitators for Employment and Career Development in their professions

Thank you for accepting our invitation to take part in this research study. I aim to find out how Venezuelan refugees manage their careers.

In the interview the researcher will ask you about your career experiences and audio record it with your permission. Then transcribe it and translate it from Spanish to English. You can decline to be recorded and continue to take part in the study.

You understand that the interview may take between 60 to 90 minutes and that there will be a 30-minute follow-up call at a later date. You also understand that the risks associated with this study are minimal.

Sharing your experience and insight will be invaluable to other Venezuelan refugee professionals. Taking part in this study does not affect your current or future relation with Texas A&M University. In the course of the interview, you can decline to answer questions. You may withdraw at any time.

For questions about this study, you can contact:

1. Deyanira Garcia Zea [redacted]
2. Dr. Larry Dooley [redacted]

For research-related questions regarding subjects' rights, you can contact the university's Institutional Review Board Human Research Protection Program Coordinator at (979) 845.7037 or by email at irb@tamu.edu.

APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

DIVISION OF RESEARCH

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

(Common Rule –Effective January, 2018)

April 16, 2020

Any study that involves in-person or face-to-face interactions may not begin or continue in-person or face to face study visits until the pause in human research activities is lifted. Only online or remote communications, telephone contact, remote monitoring, remote data collection or studies involving only data analysis may continue. Please continue to monitor the Division of Research's VPR website on the latest information available regarding changes to research related to COVID-19 conditions. https://vpr.tamu.edu/covid-19.

Type of Review:	IRB Amendment
Title:	Venezuelan Refugee Professionals in South Florida: Barriers and Facilitators for Employment and Career Development in their professions
Investigator:	Larry Dooley
IRB ID:	IRB2020-0070M
Reference Number:	109066
Funding:	Internal Funds

Documents Reviewed:	APENDICE_A_Correo_Reclutamiento 2.0 Verbal recruitment script_online 2.0 APPENDIX_A_Recruitment_email_v4_ModifiedOnline 4.0 Simple_Informed_Consent_Modified 2.0
Review Category	Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: i. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; ii. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or iii. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the

	subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by .111(a)(7).

Dear Larry Dooley:

750 Agronomy Road, Suite 2701
1186 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-1186

Tel. 979.458.1467 Fax. 979.862.3176
http://rcb.tamu.edu

The HRPP determined on 02/07/2020 that this research meets the criteria for Exemption in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104.

This determination applies only to the activities described in this IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made you must immediately contact the IRB. You may be required to submit a new request to the IRB.

Your exemption is good for three (3) years from the Approval Start Date. Thirty days prior to that time, you will be sent an Administrative Check-In Notice to provide an update on the status of your study.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Administrative Office at

1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1855-795-8636.

Sincerely,
IRB Administration

APPENDIX E: QUESTIONS TO BROWARD COLLEGE

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY [redacted]

RENEW Program Information Request

Deyanira Garcia [redacted] Mon, Oct 5, 2020 at 4:01 PM
To: Jocelyn Martinez [redacted]

Dear Mrs. Martinez,

Hope you are doing well and staying healthy.
I am contacting you again much later than I had anticipated because due to the pandemic my research was on hold for a while. I have now resumed it.

I do have a few questions for you, some are procedural some are more about the scope of the help Broward College provides to refugees.

1. Do refugees need a referral from the Department of Children and Families to be able to receive key services at BC or can they request services without a formal referral as long as they meet the eligibility requirements?

2. You mentioned lack of training and employability skills as common challenges for refugees. How does the RECAP program address these challenges? Since besides the barriers, I am also trying to identify facilitators for Venezuelan refugee professionals/college graduates, could you provide some specific examples of facilitators?

3. You also mentioned lack of funds for training, however, I know of a couple of cases when BC offered a 4-month training program for Venezuelan refugees free of charge (highly praised by both). My question is if by lack of funds you mean for formal college or vocational training at BC or somewhere else?

4. Two of the key services listed in the flyer include Educational Assessments and Prior Learning Assessments, at the same time one of the challenges you mentioned is lack of funding for prior degree's evaluation. What do the educational and prior learning assessments BC measure? What do they involve?

5. Do you work with any agency or company that can provide special pricing for refugee professionals who want their degrees evaluated?

6. In general terms, what are some of the most common recommendations included in the Career Development Plan? Does it usually include college courses/training refugees need to pay for? Any financial aid?

7. Does BC have agreements with local companies/businesses who can provide on-the-job training or career laddering for refugees?

8. Sometimes, employers do not hire refugees because of a lack of familiarity with the potential refugees have or the value they can bring. Do you know of any local initiative to educate and encourage the community, including employers to provide more opportunities for refugees?

9. Putting financial constraints aside, do you have any success stories about a refugee(s) who successfully entered the job market in their career with BC's help and how did he/she do it? Do not provide personal details, I am only interested in a description of the process he/she followed.

I know these are a handful. Take your time and respond when you can and what you can. I cannot tell you how thankful I am for your kind offer to answer my questions. I think the work you do is commendable.

Sincerely,

Deyanira Garcia Zea
Ph.D. Candidate
Graduate Assistant - Technology Support
College of Education and Human Development
Texas A&M University

[redacted]