

'Desired' and 'Undesired' Venezuelan Migrants. Discrimination and Differentiation within the Diaspora

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Abstract

Host societies have several parameters to designate what they consider 'good' or 'desirable' migrants, compared to 'bad' or 'undesirable' migrants. Both governments and societies promote these parameters using laws and regulations, such as a points system of immigration; or by exalting or criticizing certain attitudes, conditions, and behaviors, such as praising or even expecting fluency in the host country language. This paper focuses on how the Venezuelan migrants position themselves, and others, within this idea of being 'desired' and 'undesired' migrants, within the context of Bogotá, Colombia. Using theories of 'aprophobia' and 'pigmentocracy' as analytical approaches, it discusses how migrants categorize themselves and others, and how they differentiate themselves from those they consider 'bad' or less desirable. The paper draws from interviews that took place before the Covid-19 pandemic and analyses how 'othering' takes place within migrant communities.

Keywords: Venezuelan migration, Colombia, desirable, attitudes, aporphobia, pigmentocracy, othering.

Resumen:

Las sociedades receptoras tienen una serie de parámetros para designar los que se pueden considerar migrantes 'buenos' o 'deseados', comparado con migrantes 'malos' o 'indeseados'. Tanto los gobiernos como las sociedades locales promueven estos parámetros, que puede ser con leyes y regulaciones, como el uso de un sistema de puntos en la inmigración; o premiando o criticando ciertas actitudes, condiciones o comportamientos, como por ejemplo elogiando o demandando un alto nivel de fluidez en la lengua del país de acogida. Este artículo se enfoca en los migrantes venezolanos, cómo se posicionan a sí mismos, y como posicionan a otros, dentro de la idea de migrantes 'deseados' e 'indeseados' en el contexto de Bogotá, Colombia. El texto aborda analíticamente las teorías de 'apofobia' y 'pigmentocracia', discute las maneras como los migrantes se categorizan a ellos mismos y a otros, y como se diferencian de los que consideran 'malos' o menos deseados. Este estudio se basa en entrevistas etnográficas y analiza cómo funciona la exclusión dentro de las comunidades de migrantes.

Palabras claves: Migración venezolana, Colombia, deseados, actitudes, aporofobia, pigmentocracia, exclusión.

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Introduction

The economic, political, and social crisis in Venezuela has led to hundreds of thousands of its citizens fleeing abroad, with the situation being labelled a humanitarian crisis (IOM, October 2019) even before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first country of entry for most migrants is its neighbor Colombia. By early June 2023, already over 7 million Venezuelans had fled the country and Colombia hosted around 2.5 million of them (R4V, 2023).

This article focuses on the Venezuelan migration to Colombia, looking at the way Colombian society sees and classifies the ‘desirability’ of Venezuelan migrants, and analyses how migrants themselves express this desirability to differentiate themselves from others. The paper argues that privileged migrants will use a number of strategies to remain ‘desirable’ in Colombian society, including differentiating themselves from and criticizing less desirable attitudes, and/or trying to become invisible within the host society.

As argued in the introduction to this Special Issue (Devis-Amaya and Palma-Gutiérrez, 2023), I refer to the initial migration, from 1999 to 2014 as the first wave of Venezuelan migration, starting with the arrival of Hugo Chavez and ending shortly after his death. I then refer to the migration from 2014 to 2023 as the ongoing second wave, starting with a significantly larger flow of Venezuelans leaving a country with a worsening political, social, and economic crisis. This paper uses this differentiation when explaining the characteristics of the participants quoted, as well as the significance of the difference when relevant, for example, with the treatment received or the way they interact with one-another.

Prior to the arrival of the Venezuelan migrants, few scholars had explored current diasporas in Colombia.¹ Therefore, I will also draw on my previous ethnographic research on the Lebanese and Arab migration in Colombia (Devis-Amaya, 2014; 2019) which is a case that similarly argues the significance of phenotypic characteristics and socio-economic success in constructions of migrant desirability in the country.

The data presented in this paper comes from 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2018 and January 2020² in Bogotá, Colombia’s capital and largest city—located in the center of the country—and where all my participants lived at the time of the interviews. These interviews focused on Venezuelan migrants, including individuals and leaders of migrant organizations; as well as local and national Colombian government officials dealing with the migration. To access my participants, I first contacted leaders of Venezuelan migrant organizations and attended Venezuelan-related events, followed by snowballing techniques (Parker et al., 2019) to gain access to more individuals. When selecting specific participants, I

¹ Those scholars that have researched current diasporas in Colombia include Sanmiguel (2018) on Japanese migrants, Fawcett and Posada-Carbo (1997), Vargas and Suaza (2007) and Bruckmayr (2010) on Middle Eastern migrants, and Fleischer (2012) on Chinese migrants.

² These interviews were therefore carried out before the Covid-19 pandemic started in Colombia.

looked for Venezuelan professionals of middle- or upper-class backgrounds; all of whom had their papers in order at the time of the interview, through either dual citizenship, work visas/permits, or study visas. This aspect is important to highlight, as those with a legal status in Colombia are clearly in a privileged position compared to those who are in the country on an irregular status. This was done on purpose, to garner their views on the situation. The participants, shown in Table 1, arrived in Colombia between the late 1990s and 2014 (the first wave of the migration), and between 2014 and 2019 (part of the ongoing second wave of the migration).

I conducted over 20 extensive ethnographic interviews in Spanish, and I translated them myself into English. For the purposes of this paper, I am using a smaller data set of interviews, including 11 Venezuelan migrants and one Colombian official.³ Table 1 shows the list of Venezuelan participants I am including, with relevant details that help understand the analysis of their contributions. All my Venezuelan participants have been given pseudonyms and their age range is given as an estimate to protect their anonymity; moreover, no company, organization or university names are mentioned. They are listed by wave of arrival, and then alphabetically.

Table 1. Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Migration Wave	Other information
Andrés	Mid-40s	1st	Works for a pharmaceutical company. Has dual nationality.
Angela	Early-20s	1st, just before the 2nd	University student. Migrated with her parents before starting university. Has a study permit.
Cristina	Mid-30s	1st	Works for a multinational company. Has a work visa.
Federica	Mid-30s	1st	Journalist, studied at university before working. Has a permit to work and live in Colombia.
Laura	Early-40s	1st	Runs an NGO focused on helping children. Worked before for a multinational company. Has a permit to work and live in Colombia.
Juan	Late-40s	1st	Works for an international organization. Has a work visa.
Alejandra	Late-20s	2nd	Works for a multinational company. Has dual nationality and family in Colombia.

³ The interviews not covered here include five Colombian government officials, four leaders of Venezuelan migrant organisations, two representatives from Colombian businesses that have a social focus on helping the migrants, and one Venezuelan politician. These were not included due to the topics chosen and the need to protect their anonymity.

Germán	Late-50s	2nd		Lawyer. Set up his own business in Bogotá. Has a permit to work and live in Colombia.
Maria Elena	Early-20s	2nd		University student. Migrated with her extended family. Has dual nationality.
Pablo	Late-30s	Beginning of the 2nd		Works for a local NGO focused on helping Venezuelan migrants. Has a permit to work and live in Colombia.
Ramiro	Mid-50s	Beginning of the 2nd		Teacher at a school in Bogotá. Has a work permit.

I took a bottom-up interpretative approach to my interviews, which allowed my participants to guide the research without a strict set agenda from my part. The questions were very open and arose organically: I began asking Venezuelan participants about their life stories, starting in Venezuela before migrating, their migration process, and their lives in Colombia. I also asked about their opinions on different topics related to Venezuela and Colombia, as well as about their interactions with Colombian society and with the wider Venezuelan diaspora.

The characteristics of my Venezuelan participants imply that their experiences are likely to be different to other less privileged Venezuelan migrants, including those without the legal right to reside and/or work in Colombia. They are also likely to differ from those living in small towns or cities, or near the Venezuelan border. Therefore, the data presented here is not representative of all Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, or the entire Venezuelan diaspora, but rather of a specific but significant sub-group of Venezuelans in Colombia's capital. Still, the findings can apply to other large cities in Colombia and Latin America and can help understand migrant relations and differentiation within South-South migration flows. The conclusions will also be useful as a method of comparison and analysis of migrant groups further afield.

Context

The topic of Venezuelan migration has become a focus of many studies in recent years, especially since 2014 when large numbers of Venezuelans started leaving their country, with numbers increasing the following years. The Colombian-Venezuelan border is extremely porous (Idler, 2019) and is the border that most Venezuelan migrants cross.

Colombia and Venezuela have enjoyed a flexible migration flow between the countries for many years. Historically, most of the migration has been from Colombia to Venezuela, with Colombian migrants escaping political violence and economic instability, searching for the wealth that oil revenues brought to the Venezuelan economy. Indeed, the historical connection between the countries goes back centuries ago, when both formed part of Gran Colombia (1819-1832) which included Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. The close historical connection between the two countries is sometimes expressed by my participants. For example, Germán, one

of my interviewees, said somewhat in jest that the first wave of Venezuelans to Colombia was in 1819: “we came to free the country, to help it get its freedom from Spain...”.

The border between Colombia and Venezuela is in large parts based on rivers that separate the two countries. Most Venezuelans entering Colombia do so by one of four bridges that cross these rivers. The names of these bridges further exemplify the connection between the two countries, as one of them is called the ‘Union Bridge’, and the other three are named after leaders of the independence war against Spain and are major figures in both countries’ histories. The three ‘heroes’ are Simon Bolivar ‘*El Libertador*’ President of Gran Colombia for most of its existence; Francisco de Paula Santander, Vice-president of Gran Colombia from 1821 to 1827; and José Antonio Páez, cavalry leader during the war of independence and first Venezuelan president after the breakup of the Gran Colombia.

These bridges have also become more prominent in recent years, making the news as the migration unfolded, when there have been border closures, during the Venezuelan Aid live concert, and with the long queues of returnees during the Covid-19 pandemic. These bridges, therefore, exemplify the tumultuous relationship between the two countries, closely connected, with a shared history, but also divided, and at times closed off from each other. These bridges begin to tell the story about this migration.

One of the first interviews I conducted was with Colombian ex-president Juan Manuel Santos in November 2018, about his views and experience of the Venezuelan migration to Colombia. I asked him about the first migration wave, and he said:

The first wave of Venezuelans was one of high strata [upper class people], who came to Colombia to invest because they were scared of what was happening in Venezuela, but Venezuela did not have yet the humanitarian, economic or social crisis it had later on. Those Venezuelans were welcomed as they brought money and were a very positive addition to the Colombian economy. They were met with a lot of generosity, and there was no political change and no reason to worry.⁴

Santos’ choice of words is relevant, as he felt he needed to justify his belief that the Venezuelan migrants were welcomed and gave economic reasons for it. He also placed emphasis on the added economic value these individuals brought to Colombia. Indeed, the importance placed on the economic contribution of migrants seems to be constant across studies in Latin America (e.g. Doña-Reveco and Gouveia, 2021; Sheehan, 2022).

Santos’ initial stress that the Venezuelans of the first wave were of ‘high strata’ is also very telling. “Social strata” (*estrato social*) is a term used in Colombia to categorize households

⁴ President Santos was the Colombian head of government from 2010 to 2018. He saw the large increase in numbers of migrants in 2014 and led the initial steps to managing the flow.

according to their location, size, and facilities in order to build a structured classification of the amount of taxes the household will pay or the number of subsidies they will receive. The higher the strata, the higher the bills to run the household. As Pardo (2021) explains, the policy was set up so strata 5, and 6 subsidize the services of strata 3, 2, and 1. Strata 4 pays the actual consumption of the household. However, at the same time, the strata classification has become a status symbol tied to wealth and social class. Many individuals in Colombia, especially in the cities, refer to themselves and others based on their strata, which can be used both to create a sense of group belonging, as well as to discriminate (Pardo, 2021). Here ex-president Santos emphasized the positive nature of the wealth and social class the first wave of Venezuelan migrants brought and suggested they were not a matter of concern. I then asked ex-president Santos if he could tell me about the second wave of migration, and he replied:

After came the migration for humanitarian and survival reasons and that was like ‘Chinese torture;’ drop by drop it began to grow. At the beginning, it was something easy to manage, but as it began to grow, we started to worry... we decided to start censoring the Venezuelans. I never thought about discriminating against them or stopping the migration, but rather controlling it, so it didn’t overwhelm us. I asked mayors and governors to be more tolerant. We gave them more resources so they could have the capacity to absorb that population, especially in terms of health and education. And we were very aware of not allowing xenophobic sentiments to appear, as they are like an infection that spreads very quickly.

Santos’ use of the idiomatic phrase *Tortura China*, or ‘Chinese water torture’⁵, to describe the second wave refers to a much more negative experience; slower and crueler than the first. He hinted at its size and, by omission, their socio-economic status as reasons for a possible discrimination.

Of added importance to this paper are both the recognition that the migration waves had different characteristics, and that the second wave was less welcomed than the first. These points show that there is an institutional way of seeing the waves differently that is likely to have consequences on their interactions with the local society.

The differentiation between the waves is not only stressed by the Colombian government, but also by Venezuelan migrants themselves who described differences between them. For example, I asked my first-wave participants Federica and Angela (separately) how the migration had changed since they arrived in Colombia, and they said:

Federica: Well, it has changed a lot. When I arrived there weren’t as many Venezuelans [as today] here and the majority were professionals, many of them with good jobs, working for good companies, with good income, and other businessmen that came over to Colombia

⁵ ‘Tortura china’ refers to a historical Chinese practice of torturing which includes tying someone down and letting drops of water slowly fall on their forehead, one at a time (Macías, 2022). A discussion can also be had about the racialized use of this phrase and the negative connotations it may have towards a nation or nationality. However, this discussion falls outside the remit of this paper.

more than 10 years ago to invest; and they were doing very well here... the Venezuelans had a very good image. When I spoke to Colombians, they would say ‘since the Venezuelans arrived there have been more job opportunities’... and obviously I wouldn’t see in the streets any Venezuelans in difficult situations. That didn’t happen before. This started from 2014-15 onwards, when the numbers of Venezuelans migrating to Colombia really began to increase. The migration began to grow, and everyone was migrating.

Angela: When I got to Bogotá, the people at the traffic lights didn’t have signs that said ‘I am Venezuelan;’ the signs said ‘we are displaced because of the violence’⁶. So, things have been changing and having an effect on our daily lives, and there’s intolerance of course.

Federica focused on numbers and socio-economic status as the main differences, whilst Angela mentioned the visibility of Venezuelans. Both coincide that the new wave has brought migrants in more desperate conditions, and Angela mentioned that there had been a backlash.

This was also noticed by participants Juan and Cristina, who separately mentioned how the host Colombian society had been changing towards the Venezuelan migrants since the start of the second wave:

Juan: The attitude of Colombians has been changing because the socioeconomic status of the Venezuelans that are migrating now [second wave] is different. So, the Colombians were ecstatic to have Venezuelans investing in [companies] like *Tostao*, or *Justo y Bueno*, or *Farmatodo*. Venezuelans that had economic means to invest here, like those who worked in the oil industry... Colombians thought it was great. Now things are starting to change. I mean, Venezuelans with different economic means, now things are changing.

Cristina: At the start there were hardly any Venezuelans or very few, so everything was alright. However, recently you started seeing this wave that is coming to Colombia and you start hearing comments here and there...: ‘they are coming to steal our jobs’, or ‘thefts are going up in Colombia;’ even though there have always been thefts... Colombia is a country where around 99.9% of the population doesn’t have qualifications. Then in comes a Venezuelan, also without qualifications, and the system can’t cope. So of course, they come to take away even more from other people, like informal jobs. And the whole issue around social security has also been very complex.

Both Juan and Cristina noticed the socio-economic difference between the waves: the former focusing on wealth and mentioning some of the companies founded or bought by Venezuelans, and the latter on education and job competition. Once again, the economic value of the migrants is highlighted. All the participants quoted above agreed that the situation had been changing, though some painted it more negatively than others. The first wave included mostly professionals, individuals who had the legal right to live and work in Colombia, as well as many who had money to invest. However, the second wave was a lot more diverse (see Mazuera et al.,

⁶ Colombia has one of the highest numbers of internally displaced individuals (Idler, 2019), many of whom migrate to the large cities and may find themselves in precarious situations.

2019; Devis-Amaya and Palma-Gutiérrez, 2023) and it included individuals who were less wealthy, less educated, and who may not have had the legal right to live and work in Colombia. Therefore, the experiences of the first and second-wave migrants are likely to be different; and those in the first wave sensed that difference.

This paper evaluates these issues: the attitudes that privileged Venezuelans have towards less privileged ones, and how they interact and differentiate themselves from others. It addresses what Doña-Reveco and Gouveia (2021: 88) stress, that there is a “need for more research on immigrant attitudes towards other immigrants...Immigrants form part of the context of reception. Whether they welcome and accept or reject new immigrants can directly influence the new immigrants’ integration into the host society. This is particularly relevant in the case of Latin America where immigration is mostly intraregional.”

To have a theoretical understanding of the effects of these changes, the concepts of ‘aporphobia’, ‘pigmentocracy’, and ‘desired and undesired’ migrants are used here to help analyze the interviews.

Aporophobia

The term aporphobia was coined by Spanish philosopher Adela Cortina, in Spanish *aporofobia*, and derives from the ancient Greek words *aporos*, without resources, and *fobia*, fear of. As such, the term denotes the attitudes, policies, behaviors etc. of those individuals and societies that discriminate against others because of their lack of economic resources. Concisely, it describes rejection of the poor.

In her book, ‘*Aporofobia, el rechazo al pobre*’, Cortina (2017) explains that discrimination is often justified, either by the individuals or within society, by the construction of hierarchical ideas that become socially accepted. She states:

Those that look down on others take on an attitude of superiority towards the other. They believe their [characteristics] are superior and therefore, rejecting the other is justified. This is the key point in the world of group phobias: the conviction that there is an asymmetrical relationship; ...the one who discriminates [sees themselves] as superior to those being discriminated against. That is why the discrimination is considered legitimate (Cortina, 2017: 18-19)⁷.

This idea is very useful to analyze the hierarchies that have been created within the Venezuelan diaspora, how they have been constructed, and the extent to which they have been accepted.

⁷ This direct quotation, and others from Cortina, are my own translations.

Cortina's (2017) main argument is that whilst there are different types of discrimination, the most prevalent form of discrimination is against the poor. She argues that liberal democracies have long accepted that racism and xenophobia are not acceptable, and that other forms of discrimination, such as homophobia, have been criminalized. However, the author claims aporophobia is not considered by governments or societies to be a prime issue of importance or one that deserves the same rejection as other types of discrimination.

Cortina (2017) does not deny the existence of racism and xenophobia, but rather argues that they are not widely accepted by liberal societies or governments. Conversely, aporophobia goes rampant, laws are created based on it, and migrants are discriminated against because of it. She states:

The poor are the unpleasant ones, even within our own families, because the poor relative is seen as an embarrassment that is better not to highlight; whilst it is almost pleasurable to brag about the relative that is successful... It is the phobia against the poor that leads us to reject individuals, or races and ethnicities that are habitually seen as not having economic resources and, therefore, cannot offer us anything... (Cortina, 2017:21).

The argument of the family can be seen in my interviewees' comments, where Venezuelans are grouped as a family and framed under the same prism. When the majority is seen as less well off, this affects the entire family. Some exclude themselves from it, others criticize it, and others attempt to improve the situation, whilst not jeopardizing theirs. All, however, praise the success of the wealthy 'family' members.

Cortina links racial and ethnic discrimination to aporophobia, arguing that the groups of people that tend to be discriminated against because of their race are those that historically have been less economically well off. In this sense, her argument suggests the main reason for discrimination is not race but rather poverty.

I argue that this is a weakness with Cortina's theory, as it puts too much emphasis on discrimination against the poor, to the point of diminishing other types of discrimination. In other words, Cortina's theories need to be more intersectional to ensure that "... power relations of race, class, and gender, for example, are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together..." (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020: 2). Indeed, Cortina suggests that discrimination against migrants happens mainly because of wealth, instead of race, ethnicity, or religion. She states that wealthy migrants, such as Arab sheiks, are not discriminated against whilst Middle Eastern migrants that cross the sea in dinghies receive a lot of discrimination. While I agree that wealthier migrants are less likely to be the targets of xenophobia, their wealth does not completely erase the racism. There are differences between wealthy migrants from different races or ethnicities, as well as differences between poorer white, brown, and black migrants. One only needs to look at Europe's warm reaction to Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion, their positive portrayal and generalized welcome, compared to the negative press, rejection and

fearmongering received by Syrian migrants fleeing the Syrian Civil War (Lenka and Geddes, 2023). In this case, the difference between the migrant groups can and should be explained with a focus on race, and include a discussion on religion, but not simply wealth or status. In this case, intersectionality is a more holistic approach, allowing us to consider the different characteristics of individuals within groups, without necessarily negating one over another (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020). Nevertheless, Cortina is right to highlight the importance aporophobia plays in liberal democratic societies, the extent to which it is widespread, and how it manifests itself. Her arguments are useful to understand the dynamics and reactions within the diaspora.

Pigmentocracy

A theory that can help counter the overreliance on wealth and poverty when analyzing social structures is the idea of pigmentocracy, which can also be used as a tool for analyzing the experiences of migrants within Latin America.

In his book *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, Telles (2014) examines the impact of ethnoracial categorizations on inequality in the region, focusing specifically on Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Brazil. His main argument is that skin color is the primary decider in the construction of social hierarchies, despite it being relatively ignored as a factor. The book offers a thorough explanation of how the historical structures in Latin America created by the Spaniards during the Colonial period, specifically the caste system based on color, origins, and mixture, led to societies focusing on physical appearance as measures of hierarchy, based on the idea of ‘white’ being better. Latin American countries believed that a white population was essential for national prosperity (Telles, 2014: 17), and to achieve this they tried to recruit European migrants in the early 20th century. Telles argues Colombia was relatively unsuccessful in this attempt. Indeed, the largest group of migrants that Colombia received was from the Levant region: Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, (Devis-Amaya, 2019), though still receiving low numbers compared to Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and others.

Telles (2014) argues that as the ideas of whitening became increasingly discredited in the twentieth century, the notion of mestizaje became a frame through which Latin American countries could establish a positive image of racial mixing. Here the ideal citizen was still white, but mestizaje allowed for the possibility of whitening the population, as long as it included white and indigenous, instead of black (Telles, 2014: 20-21). According to the author, this created a hierarchy of pigments, a ‘pigmentocratic social pyramid’ (2014: 32), with white at the top, mestizo in the middle, and black and indigenous at the bottom.

Amongst Telles’ findings, the two most relevant here are that ethnoracial discrimination is frequently experienced and witnessed in Latin America, but that skin color is an unwavering, yet ignored feature of inequality in Latin America. Indeed, Telles (2014: 11) argues that skin color has become an “invisible and unacknowledged dimension of inequality”, constructing societies that categorize people by color and placing more value on whiteness. As such, these societies have

constructed structural obstacles for people depending on their color, with some differentiation between countries. Telles does not discuss Venezuelan society within his work, however, his inclusion of Colombian society can help demonstrate how pigmentocracy is very likely to impact migrants into the country based on the color of their skin.

Telles, however, seems to underplay the power socio-economic status can have in Latin American societies. He does briefly mention the idea that ‘money whitens’, but the argument is not fully developed. The book’s chapter on Colombia offers some assertions that seem to provide an analysis of the interplay between social class and race in the country. For example, Telles (2014) states that in Colombia policies have made social class and racial divisions invisible, even though they are very real and that “Elites are seen and recognize themselves as white, while darker persons are at the bottom rungs of the social ladder” (Telles, 2014: 83). Indeed, the focus of the book is on race, and not class, but by overly focusing on one aspect of social identity, other characteristics are under-analyzed. These aspects of social identity also influence how societies work and how individuals experience living within them; however, their interaction does not receive the necessary critical analysis or explanation that is needed to understand the intersectionality of individual experiences.

When looking at migrants coming into Colombia, the socio-economic status they have, the one they interact with, and the one they manage to achieve are extremely influential for them and their descendants in deciding where they will see themselves in society and where they will be accepted.

Migrant Desirability

As can be seen, both approaches, race and poverty are very useful to help explain some of the dynamics related to migration in Latin America, however, they also leave gaps that need addressing. I believe they should be looked at in combination instead as in competition with each other, and the ideas behind ‘desired’ and ‘undesired’ migrants can help bridge the gap between them.

Alfaro-Velcamp (2007; 2013), writing about Middle Eastern migrants to Mexico, argues that their phenotype grants them a special status in Mexican society. Her argument is based on the idea that white migrants are privileged in Mexico and their skin color grants them a higher level of desirability: they are welcomed into local society and almost encouraged to show their foreignness; they are allowed to join local high-class social clubs and educational institutions; and they marry their children into the local elites. Conversely, Alfaro-Velcamp (2007) argues that black migrants are ‘undesired’ and heavily discriminated against in Mexican society. Because of this, they try to hide their foreignness and eventually their descendants forget about it, ending up completely integrating into poorer sectors of the local society. The author then argues that Middle-Easterners are in a particular position because of their phenotype: neither white nor black; neither desired nor undesired. Alfaro-Velcamp (2007) states that this grants them the special term of

“foreign-citizens”, whose desirability is connected to their socio-economic status: the descendants of those who succeed and are prosperous can continue showing their foreignness, whilst acculturating into the local society. However, those that are not successful must completely assimilate into local society to avoid being seen as ‘undesirable’.

The link between a higher socio-economic status and ‘whiteness’ in Latin America has also been discussed before. As seen above Telles (2014) links elitism and whiteness in Colombia, whilst arguing skin color continues to be a measure of inequality, Wade (1994; 2000) connects ‘whiteness’ with economic power, Chua (2003) argues ‘whiteness’ is seen positively as ‘old money’, and Alcantara (2005) argues the poorest in Latin American societies are seen as non-whites. In this sense, desirability is connected to both race and wealth.

This differentiation between desirable and undesirable migrants is also important for the study of Venezuelan migration, as they are also in limbo, seen as neither white, nor non-white, but rather a mixture and combination of different races, as most of the rest of Latin America. In fact, the ambiguous phenotypic composition of Venezuelans is very similar to that of Colombia: it is extremely varied, with white, black, indigenous, mestizo, and different mixtures between them. This means that in terms of ‘desirability’, some migrants will be more favorable than others due to their ‘whiteness’ and, correlated to this, their socio-economic status. As President Santos’ quote implies those that arrived during the first wave were desirable, wealthy individuals who were welcomed in society; those that arrived during the second wave were not. With a larger number of migrants arriving during the second wave, many of whom are impoverished, the desirability of the entire community becomes threatened.

The connection between Latin American migrant desirability and specific characteristics has been made elsewhere too. Sheehan (2022) on her work on migration to Chile argues that both migrants and locals focus on the idea of a ‘contributing migrant’, showing how migrants based their own worth on their hard work, whilst also demonstrating how migrants themselves saw working-class Chileans as ‘lazy’. Her findings suggest that both economic desirability and aporophobia are present not only in other Latin American societies, and within migrant groups, but also from migrant groups to local poorer communities.

Sheehan (2022: 1170) argues:

By crafting conditional inclusion around labor contributions, the value of migration is articulated as an economic benefit for the neoliberal state. Positioning migration in this way bounds it, emphasizing the potential labor of migrants and limiting who is imagined to be the ideal immigrant.

Sheehan's arguments further strengthen the idea of economic success and the presence of aporophobia. As we have seen, however, desirability is not just connected to economic benefit on its own, but also to race and social standing. Moreover, the desirability is not only based on the

characteristics of an individual, but it is influenced by the entire migrant community. Furthermore, Doña-Reveco and Gouveia (2021: 87) argue that both class and ethnic self-identification affect how migrants see themselves and others, and briefly discuss how the impact of wealth and race also affects migrants. They use examples from some of their Venezuelan interviewees in Chile (immigrants themselves) talking negatively of Haitian and Colombian migrants. One of their interviewees is directly quoted as rejecting Haitians, partly because they are ‘poor’. Even though race is not mentioned, Haiti is a predominantly black country. Similarly, two other Venezuelan participants are quoted as saying that a couple of decades ago Venezuela was full of ‘Colombian criminals’ and wonder if the same is happening to Chile.

These examples further reinforce the main theories discussed here. First, that aporophobia is rampant and visible in different societies and applies to different groups of people: whether it refers to ‘poor Haitians’ or ‘criminal Colombians’ and it is even employed by people whose position in society may not be as secure, such as other migrants. Second, that racism is often hidden, but it is a systematic occurrence in many Latin American societies. Third, that there is a ranking of migrant desirability, with poor black Haitians falling at the bottom of most, if not all, Latin American countries, and ‘criminal’ Colombians not far behind.

My participants seemed aware of the aporophobia present within Colombian society. This is likely because Venezuelan society is also aporophobic, as it is present in every society (Cortina, 2017). ‘Desirable’ Venezuelan migrants now take on several different practices to keep their desirability, including differentiation between us (first wave, or wealthy) and ‘the other’ (more heterogeneous second wave, including poorer migrants [Mazuera et al. 2019]), disconnection with the diaspora, and attempting to completely integrate into the local society or at least become invisible.

Findings

Perceptions of Discrimination and Xenophobia

The issues behind aporophobia, pigmentocracy and migrant desirability have affected Venezuelan migrants in different ways. As stated, my participants are all privileged in a sense, as they all had the correct papers to be in Colombia. This could have been through dual citizenship, work permits, family reunification, refugee status etc. In addition, all of them had university degrees, or were studying for one, and had the economic means to live in the wealthy and white North side of Bogotá (*el Norte de Bogotá*). In this way, the theoretical concepts seen above are likely to have affected my participants differently to those in more precarious conditions.

This next section explores the migrants’ experiences of discrimination and xenophobia from the host society. This is an important topic to address, as different authors have noted that as the number of Venezuelans has grown, so has the xenophobia against them. Muñoz-Pogossian and García-Tufro (2020: 20-21) state that the main fears of the host society are firstly economy related;

‘migrants take jobs and overflow local services’, and increasingly, security fears. The authors list several xenophobic incidents in different countries, including anti-immigrant marches in Panama, and violent attacks in Brazil and Ecuador as examples. Taborda-Burgos et al. (2021) argue that Colombians discriminate against the second-wave migrants as they are seen as poorer and some of their interviewees argue these poorer migrants give all Venezuelans a ‘bad name’. Therefore, I wanted to find out how these issues were experienced by this group of Venezuelan migrants, and as shown below, there are differences between how the first and second wave see it and experience it.

My participant Juan seemed very self-aware and explained that the lack of discrimination towards him was because of the privileged position in Colombia that his ethnicity and socio-economic status granted him:

... because I do know others that indeed have suffered [discrimination] first-hand. But as you can see, I don’t look like a typical Venezuelan. I am one of those Venezuelans that doesn’t scare Colombians. I mean, because of my coloring, my education, well probably because I am self-sufficient and can solve my own problems, without being a burden for Colombians.

Juan is a white, red-haired man in his 40s who at the time of the interview worked for an international organization with a good salary. Through his words, Juan seemed to acknowledge his privilege in a country where pigmentocracy and aporophobia are present. Indeed, it is the combination of aporophobia and pigmentocracy that leads to different levels of discrimination, and both are necessary to maintain a ‘desired’ or ‘non-scary’ migrant status.

On the other hand, my participant Pablo failed to recognize his privileged status, being a professional, white-mestizo, from the upper-middle class: “I’ve never [been discriminated against] ... I think that xenophobia is a response to your own attitude towards life more than anything else”. Most of my participants that denied being discriminated against fell between these two arguments, not fully aware of their own privilege, but still conscious that their position is different to others, as Cristina argued:

Here in Colombia no [discrimination]. I have generally been very well received [here]. It’s not easy to migrate to another country; it’s not easy. You stop being a first-class citizen, so to speak, because your country is your country, and you move to another country to try to fit in. And even culturally, I think that even though we are very similar, Colombia is very complex.

Several studies about migration within Latin America notice that their participants report not feeling discriminated against, at least not directly (see Gissi-Barbieri et al., 2019; Taborda-Burgos et al., 2021). Gissi-Barbieri et al. (2019) suggest that the Venezuelan migrants in Chile do not see themselves as discriminated against, and that this has allowed them to climb the socio-economic ladder. For Cristina and my other interviewees, it may not have been to climb the ladder,

but rather to stay in the privileged position, or ‘first-class’, they already held within the ladder. In this sense, those participants may have wanted to retain their desired position within the host society, and reporting discrimination or even feeling discriminated against may have jeopardized this. In fact, as discussed below, Cristina later in the interview did remember being discriminated against ‘once’.

Even those that reported some sort of negativity still downplayed it and even fought back. As Angela told me:

Yeah, I have suffered some sort of xenophobia, but very mild. Very, very mild. All the Colombians that I’ve met have been lovely; really welcoming. And if at any point I’ve heard any type of comment that makes me uncomfortable, I stop it. Because that’s my personality; or I correct them, yeah, I correct a lot... I do have the tools to shut people up)

Andrés also shared a similar sentiment:

Only twice: one during a job interview with a multinational company where there was a vacancy... and the manager of that team [led the interview]. The first question she asked was ‘how do you feel, being Venezuelan, taking a job away from a Colombian?’ At that moment, I took a breath, bit my tongue, counted to ten and thanked them, saying that at that moment in time I was not interested in working in a place where my boss was the first to be xenophobic. She didn’t like that I said that. I got up from the interview and left. I thought it was really disrespectful.

Angela said any discrimination had been ‘mild’ and suggested she would fight back if she felt it. She also praised the Colombians she had met. Andrés limited the times he had felt discriminated against to just two, and in his story, he stood up against the discrimination. It is likely that their status as white, well-educated, upper-middle class Venezuelans sheltered them from more cases of discrimination. Similarly, both use their privilege to tackle any sort of ‘mild’ discrimination they encounter. Angela suggested she had the vocabulary and confidence to defend herself, whilst Andrés was clearly not in dire need of a job, could afford to make his point heard and walk out of the interview.

Isolated incidents of discrimination since the second wave

Interestingly, the large majority of those that reported they had been the victims of discrimination were first-wave migrants, and the discrimination had only taken place after the second wave started. Very few of them made the connection between the arrival of the second wave and their experiences of discrimination, at least outwardly. However, their memorable examples of discrimination all took place after the start of the second wave of migration in 2014-15, which saw large increases in the migration flow across the region.

The first isolated incident happened to Cristina at a restaurant in *Usaquén*, a wealthy north Bogotá neighborhood:

... I was queuing with my son and a man wanted to cut in, so I said to him ‘if you want, you go first, and I’ll wait’ [but he said ‘no’]. Then my husband arrives and [the man] tells my husband, ‘you go first’, [my husband replies] ‘no, no sir, if you want to go first it’s not a problem’. And the man starts saying ‘ah, because you’re Venezuelans! What do you think you are going to do here?!’ ... and ‘you have no education!’ So I said ‘no sir, I do have an education. Please, there’s no need to bring up whether I am Venezuelan or not’... Of course, he heard my husband speak, or heard me speak, and I guess he thought that because we were Venezuelan we were going to take—I don’t know what—take his place in the queue...

Alejandra told a similar story, of stereotypes being used:

Once I was coming here by plane and the young woman next to me said ‘here all the Venezuelans are coming to steal. I would never hire a Venezuelan as a house maid’, so I said ‘listen, not all of us are bad people for you to label us as that’. I don’t feel like I have come here to take anything from anyone.

Both stories are based on generalizations about all Venezuelans. Cristina had a direct confrontation, and felt the need to defend herself personally, but did not reject the suggestion that Venezuelans in general had no education. Alejandra is a second-wave immigrant, and it is not entirely clear whether the comment was directed at her or not. Still, she did not dispute the statement that ‘some Venezuelans go to Colombia to steal’, but she countered that not *all* do. Both Cristina and Alejandra were keen to defend themselves and sought to differentiate themselves from the aporophobic stereotypes and generalizations. They did not attack the premise of the aporophobia that Venezuelans are not educated, or that Venezuelans are not trustworthy to clean someone’s home, but rather they separated themselves from the group: they were different and not like other Venezuelans, they were educated, would not steal or work as maids. Indeed, they either had arrived during the first wave and had been welcomed by Colombian society, and/or were already privileged in Venezuela. The argument seemed to be not so much that the premise was wrong, that Venezuelans do not have an education or only go to Colombia to steal, but rather that it was wrong to discriminate against them as individuals, as they did not fall within those categories. Interestingly, Tribin-Uribe et al. (2020) show that Venezuelans in Colombia are more likely to have studied for longer than the average Colombian, whilst at the same time are also more likely to have an informal job. The fact that Venezuelans are more educated and for the most part cannot ‘steal’ a job, if this job is informal, seems to escape both the Colombian aggressors, as well as the Venezuelan migrants. The stereotypes of ‘uneducated’ and ‘job stealing’ migrants seem to be stronger.

At the same time, some of the stories of discrimination include the appearance of the ‘Colombian saviors’, other members of the public who are Colombian and come to the defense of

the Venezuelan migrants. Cristina continued telling me her restaurant story, after a man was xenophobic towards her family:

Cristina: ...anyhow, all the queue started fighting, saying 'why was he like that' and, anyway, he went first in the queue and that was that.

Esteban: The other people in the queue were defending you or?

Cristina: Yeah us, because the man was really rude and derogatory, and once he started saying that we 'were Venezuelans' and that we 'had come to take his place' [they defended us] ...

Likewise, Andrés' second story of discrimination also had a Colombian getting involved:

One year ago [2018] we met one of my main clients, including a colleague from a rival company. The client brought me in first [before the rep of the other company] and she [the other rep] got upset because of it. Her first comments were xenophobic, like 'this Venezuelan comes here to steal jobs from the Colombian people', and 'this Venezuelan this' and 'this Venezuelan that'; until a colleague from my own company asked her to please stop.

These stories focus on Colombians being both the main racist attackers, as well as the main defenders, coming to aid the Venezuelans migrants and reprimand the xenophobic Colombians. As Cortina (2017) stresses, racism has been heavily criticized in Western societies, and the stories suggest individuals were quick to oppose those sentiments. At the same time, it is interesting my participants decided to include those parts of the stories, as if to highlight that they know not all Colombians are xenophobic, or that even other Colombians saw how wrong these xenophobic comments were. Bringing them into their stories can be a convincing tactic, it validates their argument that the other person was wrong and that they are still 'desirable' migrants. This suggests the first-wave Venezuelan migrants that have experienced discrimination due to their nationality were not inclined to criticize the entire Colombian society, at least not to a Colombian interviewer, but rather focused on individuals whose attitudes were rejected by them and by others in society. It creates a link or bond between the Venezuelan victims of discrimination and the Colombians that reject such discriminatory attacks. The 'other' here becomes the Colombian aggressor, instead of the Venezuelan migrant.

Similarly, a very common response from those that said they had not been discriminated against, was praising the host community, as Germán stated: "Colombia has been with us, and with me in particular, very generous." This suggests that either they expected to be discriminated against, as if it was the norm, or rather, were downplaying the attitude of the host community and focusing on positive experiences rather than negative ones. Germán here is keen to express his gratitude to Colombia, and once again, validate his desirability as a migrant.

My interviewee Laura, who runs an NGO, was also keen to tell me examples of how Colombians help Venezuelans within particular social spheres but discriminating in others. First, she focused on the differences between strata:

I have never felt xenophobia during my fieldwork. I mean, when you go to [she names small cities and towns, and poorer neighborhoods in Bogotá] you only hear women saying, or people saying ‘people opened their doors for me, and gave me food’, ‘gave me *aguapanela*⁸... ‘They lent me a hand’. Where do you feel xenophobia? In the higher strata. At my son’s school. ‘Go back to Venezuela’ ‘here, have some water because in your country there isn’t any’. It’s that fear of ‘they are going to take away from me what is mine’. It’s that fear of ‘they are here to steal my job’.

Once again, Laura stressed that she had not felt discrimination but explained that it did exist. In her testimony, you have both the Colombian saviors who helped the Venezuelan migrants in different ways, and the wealthier individuals who she claims are more xenophobic. She reinforced her argument by telling me a story about the mass transport system in Bogotá, the *Transmilenio*, known for having individuals trying to sell food, drinks, and snack informally:

... when the police arrive and they are selling sweets in the *Transmilenio*, which is not allowed... it’s actually the Colombians that cover for them [the sweet sellers]. That happens at that level. That doesn’t happen up here.

When saying ‘up here’ Laura raised her hand flat over her head, to signal a ‘high position’. The interview also took place in a restaurant along the *Parque 93*, arguably one of the most coveted commercial spaces in the city, which she chose to have the interview. Laura also spoke about food delivery app *Rappi*, and the mostly Venezuelan delivery drivers that work for them, riding bicycles or motorcycles.

It’s reckless to let *Rappi* [drivers] be annoying in *Parque 93*. What has the company done to train those people and explain to them that in Bogotá you must respect the [no parking] lines? You can’t sit on the sidewalk in front of a business. If you are going to hire these people, you must educate them... so, xenophobia? It’s here, in *Parque 93*, where they are bothered about *Rappi* [drivers] sitting down talking in ‘Venezuelan’... and in private schools, which is very sad because it’s kids repeating things they hear at home.

Here, Laura simultaneously accuses and then defends these Venezuelan migrants. She seems to suggest that the discrimination is happening because of aporophobia, as those discriminated against are poorer members of society that have insecure gig economy jobs. Moreover, Laura suggests the discrimination is because of their attitudes and lack of cultural knowledge or ‘education’ and blames the company that hires the Venezuelans drivers for being irresponsible. However, she still marks a strong differentiation between herself and the *Rappi*

⁸ A traditional Colombian drink made with sugarcane sucrose.

drivers, as she speaks of them as ‘those people’ and ‘them’. She is not the cause or the recipient of the xenophobia, but rather the behavior of a group of Venezuelans that are not like her.

That differentiation was visible in other ways too. Some Venezuelans argued that most or all the discrimination they had encountered in Colombia was directed to other Venezuelan migrants, not to them. For example, Cristina stressed that she had only experienced direct discrimination that one time at the restaurant. However, she also said she had overheard other negative comments:

At work, there’s a comment here and there. It was usually generalizing, right? That the Venezuelans were now coming to steal, and this and that”.

Even though she overheard a discriminatory remark towards Venezuelans at work, she did not feel included in it. Probably because the comment referred to the Venezuelans that were arriving ‘now’ i.e., during the second wave, not like her who arrived during the first wave. Cristina seemed to be aware of the negative nature of the comments, but also seemed to feel that the comments did not apply to her.

Distancing from the ‘community’

Still however, several Venezuelan migrants took steps to distance themselves from other Venezuelans or the idea of being Venezuelan. They stated that either they had no contact with the Venezuelan diaspora in general or made statements to differentiate themselves from it. These individuals, professionals, with university degrees, and established friendships and family in Colombia did not feel they belonged to the same community as the newer arrivals and/or to the wider Venezuelan diaspora. In fact, they felt the second wave of Venezuelan migrants was jeopardizing their position as ‘desired’ Venezuelans and the best way they saw to protect it was to distance themselves from it.

I asked Angela if she had much contact with the new Venezuelan arrivals, and she answered:

What do you mean? With the people that are coming, walking, etc.? No, I haven’t met anyone that has walked to the border and crossed [into Colombia].

As seen above, the second wave has been a lot more heterogeneous than the first, and included many wealthier and whiter individuals, but Angela still connected it to just those that crossed into Colombia by foot.

Others have taken steps that many other migrant communities have taken before: making sure their descendants are fully integrated into the local society. This position is often taken when individuals are in a disadvantaged position, as Alfaro-Velcamp (2007) argues.

My interviewee Cristina said she did not consider herself part of the Venezuelan community in Bogotá. When I asked why, she replied:

No, because for us when we migrated, and it was something we agreed with my husband, one way or another you have to adapt to the culture and to live here. There is a Venezuelan community and we have met some who are part of it, who would tell us: 'we don't listen to Colombian radio', so they stream Venezuelan radio. 'We don't watch Colombian television,' they watch Venezuelan television. That streaming is also negative because at the end of the day you are working in Colombia, you have to learn the Colombian laws, the Colombian idioms. Yes, you will always be Venezuelan, but one cannot disregard the other culture.

Cristina's testimony follows a sentiment expressed by some of my other participants, who felt that a specific group of 'other' Venezuelans did not integrate enough into Colombian society. Through this claim, Cristina can distance herself, as an 'integrated' individual, from the community of Venezuelans seen as less desirable.

Similarly, some participants have taken steps to minimize the likelihood of being the victims of discrimination by not talking on public transport or by imitating a Colombian accent from a different region. They are attempting to avoid 'becoming the other' and distancing themselves from other Venezuelans, by trying to become invisible within Colombian society in the short or long term. These decisions help both perpetuate the stereotypes that are being used to label the migrant group, the perceived undesirability of the entire Venezuelan community, as well as shield these individuals from them. In a way, these actions represent a self-defense mechanism against a difficult situation; one that would not be taking place if they had been able to stay in 'their' country. For example, Ramiro was telling me a story about travelling on the *Transmilenio* when he encountered another Venezuelan migrant,

Ramiro: In fact, I try not to speak [at all]

Esteban: On the *Transmilenio*?

Ramiro: Yes, because the accent gives me away. So, well, that's a reality.

Ramiro is one of the participants who said he had never been discriminated against, but it seems he had still developed techniques to minimize the chance of any discrimination taking place. Similarly, Cristina, who recalled only one direct instance of discrimination, was telling me about the changes felt since the arrival of the second wave of migration and the increase in discrimination:

So, what do you do, you try not to speak, you try saying that you are from Norte de Santander, you try saying you are from *La Costa*⁹, because of the accent, or not to wear Venezuelan things or anything like that.

By ‘Venezuelan things’ she meant items of clothing that would reveal she was Venezuelan, like those that have the flag on them. As with Ramiro, they do not want others to ‘discover’ they are Venezuelan.

As seen above, my participant Angela was adamant that if she was ever discriminated against, she would stand up to it. However, there still had been a change for her:

And they [the new migrants] are coming into a horrible year, a horrible year, I mean, I remember that before, I was proud to say that I was Venezuelan, I was proud, but now...

Angela then continued:

My mom panics in an Uber, [she says] ‘if the man asks me where I am from, I’m going to say from *La Costa*, because [what if] he turns and punches me?’, and I am like ‘mooom...’. And she says, ‘It’s because I get scared’. And it’s because now it’s not about social class. No, now it’s about who you are, where you were born. And I think that’s kind of absurd.

Angela and her mother seemed to be struggling with their nationality because of what it represented. Furthermore, the extract seems to suggest that social class discrimination was usual, normal and/or acceptable, but that nationality-based discrimination was not. It interplays with the aporophobia and pigmentocracy arguments, the former being more visibly acceptable than the other, as Cortina (2017) suggests.

Many first-wave Venezuelan migrants have noticed their ‘desired status’ is being threatened by the consequences of the second, much larger migration and are taking active steps to not be associated with the ‘undesirable’ aspects of the national community to which they have been assigned. Still, they are able to become invisible within Colombian society by hiding or masking attributes which could make them visible, such as their accent. As such, they become integrated into Colombian society, where their wealth and coloring determine their desirability. This gives them a privilege that very few Colombians have, but that many white and mestizo Venezuelans do.

‘Undesirable’ attitudes

At the same time, newer arrivals were more likely to express a belonging to an imagined community of Venezuelan migrants, more likely to volunteer in activities led by the migrant organizations, and more likely to participate in protests against the Maduro regime. However, they

⁹ *La Costa* refers to the Caribbean Coast of Colombia and *Norte de Santander* is the Colombian region that most Venezuelans cross. These Colombian accents are the most similar to the Venezuelan accents.

were still vocal to create a differentiation between themselves and other Venezuelans who they considered did not have the right attitude, not only as migrants but also as Venezuelans.

Maria Elena told me a story that she claimed had impacted her. She was on a bus travelling to university when a man boarded the bus and began asking for money, saying he was Venezuelan and explaining the hardships he had encountered. When the man went by Maria Elena's seat, she decided to talk to him:

I asked him: 'Where are you from? He said: 'I'm from Monagas;' It's a State in Venezuela [Maria Elena explained to me], then the man started to tell me his story, without me asking him to: 'I didn't used to do this in Venezuela' full of arrogance and pride about his new 'job'... [He said]: 'someone found a job for me working for *Rappi*, but pedaling is not for me. Never. I can't be bothered... to have to ride a bicycle and get wet? No way', he said, and then added 'I bought myself this new phone with the money I made here [on buses]'. And I was left like... [speechless]. It's very hard that people from your own country are the ones doing this... They are losing their sense of dignity by getting on a bus to beg for money without doing anything, because he wasn't even selling candies.

Maria Elena's feelings of unpleasantness come not because the man is losing his individual dignity, but because of the repercussions his actions can have on other Venezuelans, like herself and—following from Cortina's (2017: 21-22) argument—causing Venezuelans as a community to lose some of their dignity.

Several of my participants also complained about Venezuelans asking for money on public transport. Alejandra, for example, stated:

... that's very common here, that they go on the *Transmilenio* or on buses 'Hello, I'm Venezuelan'. As a Venezuelan myself I don't agree with that because I know that there are work opportunities here. Even if it's picking up trash, or [working] in a restaurant. But to know that our own pride and lack of humility has led us to that; to feel that we cannot work in a restaurant, and [instead] prefer to get on a bus to ask for money.

Alejandra seemed upset by how the Venezuelan community portrays themselves as a diasporic community in Bogotá. She wanted Venezuelans to be seen as hard workers, regardless of the job, not as undesirable beggars in an aporophobic society.

Some first-wave Venezuelans were critical of the entire second wave, focusing their criticism on how they, as 'desirable' migrants, were required to support the 'undesirable' second wave Venezuelans financially. As my interviewee, Andrés, argued:

... because here [in Colombia] all of us pay for our health, here even the poor pay for health, even if it's just one *peso*, but they pay. So, where are the resources going? And that involves the Venezuelan migrants. Because they have even pushed aside those of us that do pay for health services, to give priority to the migrants.

Contrary to Alejandra, Andrés used a ‘them’ and ‘us’ rhetoric, distancing himself from the newly arrived migrants. He placed himself in a group with Colombians who ‘pay for services’ and who have been ‘pushed aside’ by the arrival of what he perceived as ‘the other’: the new, undeserving Venezuelan migrants.

Cristina appeared to be more sympathetic of the plight of the poorer second-wave migrants, but again became critical and questioned the extent to which they would benefit society:

If I put myself in their shoes [the second wave *caminantes*] I say to myself, ok, they are people that don’t have money, that come here and don’t have access to a job, that may not have anything to do here..., what do they come to do? And we will support them. But that’s the thing, what about the future? There are people that will go begging in the streets, that won’t give any added value to society, even if they want to.”

Both aporophobia and the ‘them and us’ differentiation are present in her argument, again joining ranks with the Colombian population. ‘We cannot take care of them forever’ she seemed to suggest. She also reiterated arguments that migrants must be beneficial to the country and bring ‘value’ as she surely believed she did, due to her well-earning multinational company job. In the end, both Andrés and Cristina left Venezuela for the same reasons as the second-wave migrants: economic instability, lack of opportunity, insecurity etc. They may have been sympathetic to the poorer migrants wanting to leave Venezuela but were not as agreeable with the idea of the migrants staying in Colombia.

Moreover, some of my interviewees offered solutions of how to avoid undesired migrants in Colombia, as Germán stated:

Why do you have to charge? Because you gave them the right to stay so they could work. If someone isn’t capable of earning money to pay for it, they aren’t of interest to Colombia. You’re not interested in people that don’t come to earn money, that come to live off the state. We don’t want that migration either, not even us. We may have our needs, but we have to meet them. So, you have to charge.

Germán even offered suggestions of how the government could help Venezuelans to avoid becoming ‘undesired’ by sending them to particular areas where specific work is needed. He told a story of a former cattle herder who came to him:

[he said] ‘I used to be a cattle herder and farmer’, ‘what are you doing in Bogotá, man?’ What did I do? I sent him to Villavicencio [the main city in a zone known for cattle herding] because over there his skills are appreciated... I understand that Venezuelans are saving themselves [by leaving Venezuela], but we cannot become a burden here. We have to be helpful.

Germán’s suggestions were also aporophobic, as not only some individuals would be of ‘no interest’ to Colombia, but also his idea to get them working so they are not ‘a burden’. These

wealthier Venezuelans are adopting negative attitudes towards those less wealthy as a tool to fit within the host society (Del-Tesol-Craviatto 2009; Doña-Reveco and Gouveia 2021). Indeed, Doña-Reveco and Gouveia (2021) argue that migrants themselves classify each other as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ depending on their characteristics, including education, socio-economic status, and attitudes. They suggest that to be considered ‘good’ the migrants believe they have to agree with the sentiments of the local society and even call for stricter entry rules. The ‘desirable’ migrants here analyzed have similar characteristics to those described as ‘good’ by Doña-Reveco and Gouveia. They also distance themselves from the ‘bad’ or ‘undesirables’, criticize certain attitudes and behaviors, and separate themselves from the entire diaspora, both physically and mentally. As such, the undesirable migrants are treated like ‘the other’ by those who consider themselves ‘desirable’. To avoid being discriminated against by the host society, the previously ‘desired’ or ‘good’ migrants join in the aporophobic discrimination of newer, less wealthy migrants, portraying themselves as different from those who are the target of criticisms. Most of the time the differentiation within the community is done based on perceived attitudes, habits, or intentions. My participants stressed the need not to generalize among all Venezuelan migrants, but at times fell into the same generalizations when differentiating themselves from other Venezuelan migrants.

Conclusion

The first wave of Venezuelan migrants here analyzed, are seeing their status of privileged foreigners eroded by the mass migration of their compatriots, which has led to negative and sometimes discriminatory attitudes from sectors of the Colombian host society. As such, many have tried to distance themselves from the diaspora, using a variety of tactics. Some have disconnected themselves from the wider migrant community and are trying to integrate into Colombian society as much as possible. Similarly, some try to remain invisible within society to avoid any type of discrimination, even when they report not being discriminated against. This invisibility is possible due to their similarities with the host society and culture in terms of coloring, religion, language, and some socio-cultural characteristics. However, they also hide or act out other characteristics, such as their accent, to avoid being recognized as Venezuelans in certain public settings. A further reaction has been to be vocal when being discriminated against, by differentiating themselves from the stereotypical characteristics of the perceived mass migration, though not necessarily rejecting the stereotype itself. Rather, they defend their individual position of privileged Venezuelans that are not like the ‘others’.

In this sense, these participants are joining the criticism whilst defending themselves. Finally, another tactic has been to be outwardly critical of certain groups or individuals within the Venezuelan migration that fail to fit the ‘desired migrant’ ideal. A common theme that comes out is the rejection of the poor, Cortina’s ‘aporophobia’ (2017) shown not only by sectors of the host Colombian population, but also by privileged Venezuelan migrants. The differentiation and criticisms are directed towards those not deemed ‘desired’, which in these examples are all less

economically well off. These Venezuelan migrants seem to reject the idea that all Venezuelans are part of the same conglomerate, by stressing that they are different, more integrated, more educated, better off, and more desirable. Some even recognized that they were ‘whiter’, though issues surrounding race were often raised indirectly.

As such, it is important to recognize these differences and to avoid assumptions of unity or homogeneity of the Venezuelans abroad. It is difficult to talk about a singular community that can encompass all Venezuelans, instead of talking about plural communities, with one of them being the wealthier and privileged ‘desired’ Venezuelans. Therefore, we should avoid references to a singular diaspora, which is far from standardized, and the experiences of these Venezuelan participants are very different from those of other, less-privileged Venezuelans.

In this sense, the privileged Venezuelans that arrived during the first wave saw their position as desirable migrants threatened with the arrival of the more heterogeneous second wave. Not because the work or legal status of the former had changed, but because of the threat the new migration brought. With the entire community becoming poorer and more diverse, the aporophobic discriminations was likely to be felt by all (Cortina 2017), and the diversity of the migration was likely to be less welcomed due to its coloring (Telles, 2014). These threatened the desirable status of all Venezuelans.

As such, the first-wave Venezuelan migrants have taken steps to safeguard themselves and secure their desirable position by distancing themselves from the new members of the diaspora, and from the diaspora itself. They argued that having lived in Colombia for such a long time meant their network of friends was now Colombian and some even argued that the only Venezuelans they interacted with were family members. It was almost as if they were ashamed of the majority of new arrivals and wanted to disassociate themselves from them. They did not want to suffer the social or racial discrimination constructed by the Colombian society and applied to their nationality group, so they constructed different ways of separating themselves and ‘othering’ the new arrivals.

Those that arrived during the second wave found it more difficult to make this disassociation, but they still differentiated themselves from those they considered were giving the Venezuelan diaspora a negative reputation. They also created an ‘othering’ between what they considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’ behavior, which in turn makes the individual more or less desirable to the local society, such as having a particular type of employment, or educational level. Unsurprisingly, most of the bad behavior is aimed at those least well off.

Indeed, from my participant’s contributions and the theories discussed, what becomes extremely clear is that migrant desirability is constructed by both ‘aporophobia’ and ‘pigmentocracy’, where perceived race forms an important part of class differentiation and individuals strive to be seen as wealthy, desirable, and deserving migrants. These theories are important to understand not only the interaction between the host society and the migrants, but also within the migrant community or communities.

Further study

An area of further study is how the creation of community groups can be used to both stand out from the crowd as well as to try to influence the rhetoric used within and about migration. In addition, the groups can also help others to minimize the undesirability factors. Even though pigmentocracy is an important tool to use, race was a less common topic in the interviews, probably because it remains a taboo subject (Telles, 2014). For the most part the topic was not brought up organically by my participants. As such, it is difficult to assess the full extent to which pigmentocracy is having an effect in the discrimination of the Venezuelan migrants, both by the host society as well as by other Venezuelan migrants. Therefore, there are several intersectional insights within this text that illuminate the link to pigmentocracy and help further understand the impact it may have on migrant communities.

To create a more comprehensive intersectional understanding of the experiences of migrants, other individual identifiers can also be considered, including gender, age, profession, and sexuality, among others. Race and socio-economic status are extremely important for this context of Venezuelan migration to Colombia and can be seen as the start of a more thorough study that should include the categories above.

Similarly, Ospina-Celis et al. (2020) notice how the Covid-19 pandemic led local administrations in Colombia to treat wealthy foreign tourists more favorably than less-wealthy Venezuelan migrants. It would also be interesting to reconnect with my participants and analyze how the Covid-19 pandemic affected them and their relationships with both the host society and the larger Venezuelan diaspora. Finally, it is worth exploring whether the pandemic and its consequences have now generated a third migration wave, again with different characteristic to the previous ones, or whether the current second wave is still ongoing.

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