

EXPLORING SOCIAL IDENTITY AND THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS OF
VENEZUELAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A MIDWESTERN U.S. UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

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This multiple case study sought to explore the process of acculturation on stress levels, coping strategies, and social identity choices of six international undergraduate students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S. university. This study analyzed the personal experiences of three male and three female participants who have been studying from 1-4 years in a Midwestern university. Findings explicated that all participants experienced some degree of acculturative stress including difficulty with the English language, practicing new cultural behaviors, and in some cases, discrimination from the host society. All participants engaged in retaining and forming social networks as a method to cope with these stresses. The majority of the participants reported feeling a more familial social bond with co-nationals during their sojourn, although participants actively established social networks with host nationals as well in order to learn about or integrate into mainstream U.S. society. Social mobility between co-national and host national social groups in various social contexts was also reported. Thus, this study found that international students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S. university experience acculturative stress as a result of intercultural contact and manage this stress by both retaining and forming social identities with co-national and host national social groups within the new sociocultural context of the U.S.

DEDICATION

For those individuals who were unafraid to go to great lengths and engage in a grand journey in
order to learn about themselves and find their place
in the world.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Each year, thousands of individuals migrate from a source or home country to a host country for a variety of different reasons such as political instability, high unemployment rates, family reunification, or, in the case of international students, the opportunity to study abroad at an institute of higher education. Globalization and a demand for an exceptional education have expanded the number of students pursuing higher education abroad (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) and the United States is the most sought-after host country for international students. For the past 50 years, more international students have studied in the U.S. than any other host country destination (Institute of International Education, 2012). A record high of approximately 723,277 international students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the U.S. during the 2010/11 academic year, which is a 32% increase since 2000/01 (IIE, 2012).

The majority of the current literature and research surrounding international students within the U.S. context tends to focus on those who journey from countries of East and South Asia since this group makes up nearly one-half of the international student population within the U.S. (IIE, 2012). However, research reflective of this population tends to overlook an intriguing increase of international students from Central and South America. From 2010/11 to 2011/12, six South American countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Venezuela) experienced a rise in student sojourners seeking an education within U.S. universities, with Venezuela being the country to have the most significant increase of 14.4% (IIE, 2012). Beyond the current rise of the Venezuelan international student population within the U.S., data strongly suggest that more Venezuelan students will be studying abroad in the U.S. in the near future; therefore, this international population is notable and warrants further research. For instance, Venezuela was one of only five countries out of the top 25 places of origin to have an over 10%

increase in international students studying in the U.S. from 2009/10 to 2010/11 (IIE, 2012). This growing outrush of university students from Venezuela (Margolis, 2009) to the U.S. may be attributed to various Venezuelan sociopolitical reforms and policy changes; thus, these should be considered when studying the aforementioned expansion of international students from Venezuela in the U.S. In addition, a significant amount of literature claims that acculturation is a process that is inevitable for international students as they study abroad. As international students learn to adapt to life in the U.S., they experience the phenomenon of acculturation, or various social and cultural changes which result from continuous cross-cultural contact between two distinct cultural groups (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011). When international students sojourn to the U.S., they are faced with the difficulty of adjusting to a new sociocultural environment (customs, behaviors, language and values) and, therefore, may experience acculturative stress related to the process of adapting to the new environment (Berry, 2005). Thus, these rising numbers of Venezuelan international students may face challenges and stresses as they adjust to the cultural, social, and linguistic norms of mainstream U.S. society.

It is also imperative to note that as international students experience acculturative stress, they also utilize various methods in order to deal with these challenges. The most prominent methods include learning the host language/cultural norms and forming social networks with either co-nationals or host nationals in order to feel a sense of belonging through these social connections (Li, Fox & Almarza, 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). International students aspire to become part of at least one social group within the host country in order to establish secure bonds and a feeling of belonging within that group by utilizing certain social norms/behaviors in differing social contexts. It is this perceived sense of belonging to a social group that allows international students to experience decreased levels of acculturative stress.

Social bonds allow international students to develop a sense of trust, security, and self-esteem because these students feel they understand “where they belong” in the social context and, consequently, how to behave within the larger society as a member of a certain social group.

Background of the Study

International students fall into the category of sojourners because they travel abroad for a certain period of time with the intention of returning to their home country (Berry et al., 2011). Due to the impermanent nature of a student sojourn, some international students may feel less compelled to learn and adapt to the cultural norms, customs, or dominant language of a host society, which may directly induce higher levels of future acculturative stress. However, there are several factors that affect the levels of stress an international student experiences during the process of acculturation because not all individuals will experience acculturation or its related stresses in the same manner (Berry, 1990). An individual who possesses prior experience within or knowledge of a host society may experience less stress during the process of acculturation (Berry, 1990; 2005). However, regardless of the fact that this stress may be more or less prevalent during a student’s sojourn, in the literature it is well documented that international students experience some degree of anxiety or stress during acculturation due predominantly to cultural, social, and linguistic differences between the home and host cultures (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Halic, Greenberg & Paulus, 2009; Li et al., 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). When these students experience acculturative stress, coping strategies are often utilized. Empirical research and related literature highlight that international students tend to utilize social interaction and the development of various social networks (among co-nationals and/or host nationals) as a primary coping strategy (Church, 1982; Li et al., 2007; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). Therefore, the social element is an imperative aspect of an international student’s acculturation

process. In accordance with the aforementioned statement, literature illustrates that individual changes occur during acculturation at the cognitive level, which refers to how people perceive both their own and other social groups as well as how an individual identifies with and belongs to certain social groups (Berry, 2007; Berry et al., 2011; Senyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000; Tomich, McWhirter, & King, 2000).

Therefore, this study employs both Berry's (1988) acculturation framework and Tajfel's (1972) social identity theory (SIT). Berry's (1988) framework of acculturation revolves primarily around social exchange and interaction (for example, dominant Culture A engages in cross-cultural contact with non-dominant Culture B) and consequent stress occurs within the non-dominant group because members of that group may become overwhelmed by the host society's dissimilar language, cultural norms and behaviors. Tajfel's (1972) theory focuses on why and how individuals identify with certain social groups and practice particular sets of social behaviors (social identity) for the purpose of establishing a sense of belonging and personal well-being. Social interactions occur frequently between groups of individuals and these interactions enable various social groups to each define their collective behaviors, attitudes and beliefs by observing and comparing themselves to other groups (Hogg, 2006; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). During cross-cultural contact, a non-dominant group member may perceive himself or herself differently within the larger, dominant social context, which often results in stress and consequently, his/her social identity is often challenged and may alter because identity is constructed through social interaction (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). International students often experience degrees of stress as they attempt to understand and adjust to a new sociocultural environment as they engage in cross-cultural contact with the dominant host society. Therefore, this study focuses on the acculturation process of Venezuelan

international students in a new sociocultural environment, namely the U.S., and its effects on acculturative stress and social interactions, as these students' struggle to retain the familiar social identity developed in their home country while they are simultaneously immersed in various social groups within the new social setting.

Justification for the Study

As previously stated, there has been an increase in numbers of Venezuelan international students in the U.S., but because these numbers are significantly lower than those of students arriving from Asian countries, students from Latin American countries of origin are often overlooked in both literature and research. Although several studies related to the acculturative stresses and coping strategies of the international student population in the U.S. have been conducted within the past 25 years, such research typically focuses on large groups of international students of various national origins, with typically one or two participants being from Mexico or Central or South America (Halic et al., 2009; Li et al., 2007). In more recent literature, students from one region of the world are typically studied together (for example, a researcher may study international students in the U.S. who journeyed from "Latin America" or "the Middle East"), but this approach largely fails to consider that these students are from different home countries that may in fact differ considerably in cultural values and behaviors, despite being located in a similar region of the world. Therefore, such a research approach risks compiling the cultural behaviors and values of peoples from a particular world region and assuming that if they are all similar, which may not be the case. This approach may fail to recognize the differences that individuals from various countries possess. For example, the culture and traditions that are highly valued in Venezuela vary significantly from other Latin American countries. Thus, this study will contribute to the international student literature by

focusing exclusively on students from the country of Venezuela and how the process of acculturation, including the stresses and coping strategies associated with it, affects their social identities and interactions while attending a university in the Midwestern U.S.

In addition, much of the research regarding the combination of social identity and acculturation has been directed towards refugees and immigrants (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003), but limited attention has been devoted to the investigation of the affects of acculturation on social identity as it pertains to the Venezuelan international student population within the U.S. Therefore, this study will add to the scope of the international student literature by explicating how the process of acculturating within a new sociocultural environment affects the social choices and identities of six Venezuelan international students at one American university and thereby, help to bridge the gap in the research literature. This focus on a single sending country will allow a more thorough understanding of the culture, norms, and values pertinent to the group of international students from one South American country and, therefore, more adequately capture how the home culture compares to or differs from the U.S. host culture. Sociocultural differences between the two cultures can be viewed as potential sources of acculturative stress for the international student population from Venezuela; for that reason, this study seeks to examine and interpret the unique acculturative experiences, stresses, coping strategies, and social choices utilized by this specific group of student sojourners.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The ultimate purpose of this study is to explore how the process of acculturation affects the acculturative stress, coping strategies, and social identities of international students from Venezuela studying at one Midwestern U.S. university as there are no qualitative case studies focusing on the combination of these research areas. In addition, the study seeks to explicate the

influence the process of acculturation has on an individual's choice of social group and social identity in various social contexts. This study employs a qualitative multiple case study in order to glean new information regarding the personal experiences of the acculturation process and social identity choices of six individual Venezuelan undergraduate students studying at a Midwestern U.S. university. The research explores the relationship between the acculturation process of student sojourners and the social realm, including social groups, behaviors, and identity.

Beyond adding to the body of academic literature, this study also seeks to contribute to the mental health field by providing mental health professionals with vital information regarding how international students from this specific country experience stress within the context of the U.S. and how these professionals may administer proper treatment in order to assist students who are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, or depression due to the often difficult process of acculturation. Additionally, this research may provide institutions of higher education in the Midwestern U.S. with proposals concerning how to better assist Venezuelan international students who may be struggling with language or cultural differences or experiencing difficulty establishing relationships with peers. Since this study emphasizes the importance of social groups and social networks, it may also be useful to these institutions of higher education by offering evidence as to why organizations that stimulate social interaction between U.S. and international students may provide social and psychological benefits to both student groups.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the process of acculturation affect the acculturative strategies, stress levels and social categories/identities of international students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S. university?

2. How do the social and psychological characteristics of an international student from Venezuela studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S. affect the acculturation strategy chosen and acculturative stress levels?
3. What social or cultural factors influence which social categories/identities are deemed as “salient” within a particular social context or life domain to an international student from Venezuela studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S?
4. What social or cultural factors act as barriers or enablers to social mobility and the formation of a dominant or desirable social identity for international students from Venezuela studying in the Midwestern U.S?

Organization of the Chapters

This thesis is divided into five chapters: introduction of the study and main research questions; in-depth overview of the relevant literature; description of the multiple steps utilized to collect, study and analyze the data; identification and interpretation of the study’s findings; a discussion of the findings in relation to the existing literature, study’s limitations and suggestions for future research.

Following the introduction, Chapter II extensively explores the literature relevant to several areas of the study including the sociopolitical conditions in the country of Venezuela that may be pushing university students abroad, the acculturation framework (Berry, 1988), including stresses and coping strategies experienced by the international student population, and the elements of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1972), which explores why individuals seek to form social connections with certain groups in various social contexts.

Chapter III discusses the qualitative methods of the multiple case study utilized in this research. Individual semi-structured interviews, field notes, contact summary sheets, and a

researcher diary were the tools used for data collection. This chapter also includes specific techniques of data analysis as well as considerations related to the ethics and validity of the research process.

Chapter IV provides an in-depth discussion of the findings discovered within the study. This chapter illustrates the individual experiences of each of the six participants by utilizing the technique of within-case data analysis and presents similar and differing themes that extend across all participants through cross-case analysis.

Finally, Chapter V contains a detailed depiction of the findings presented in Chapter IV and situates them within the literature related to the process of acculturation and social identity theory. This chapter concludes by providing the overall limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research.

List of Key Terms

Acculturation: the cultural change that results from continuous, firsthand contact between two or more distinct and autonomous cultural groups (Berry, 1988; 1990; 2005).

Acculturative stress: the anxiety or conflict produced from intercultural contact that takes place during the process of acculturation (Berry, 2005).

Coping strategy: a method utilized to decrease the amount of stress experienced due to intercultural contact (Berry, 1987).

Acculturating group: a group of individuals undergoing intense acculturation. The six main acculturating groups include: indigenous peoples, ethnocultural groups, immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and sojourners (Berry, 1990; 2005).

Sojourner: peoples who choose to move to a new society/culture temporarily (Berry, 1990).

Host national: a citizen of the country to which an international student sojourns (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

Compatriot or Co-national: a fellow resident or citizen of the country from which the international student has sojourned (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

Social identity: a shared, collective representation of who one is and how one should behave (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Social category: a social group consisting of more than two people who share the same social identity (Hogg, 2006).

Social mobility: an act that occurs when a member of a low status social group or category seeks to advance psychologically into a high status social group or category (Hogg, 2006).

Social capital: social networks and relationships among people that are based on organization and trust (Coleman, 1988).

Human capital: knowledge, skill sets and education levels achieved by an individual (Coleman, 1988).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents the literature consulted for this study, and explores the acculturation framework as well as the stresses, coping strategies, and social identities developed and utilized by international students as they adjust to a new sociocultural environment. However, in order to glean an in-depth understanding of the cases explored in this study, the background of the international student population from Venezuela should be explicated. Therefore, the design of this chapter aims to first present a comprehensive account of the current controversial sociopolitical setting within Venezuela, which consequently ignited reforms within the social and educational realms that have been pushing college-aged students abroad since 2003 (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). Following the presentation of the Venezuelan educational and political context, this chapter then expands upon the acculturation framework, the acculturative stress model, the various pressures experienced by the international student population and subsequently concludes with a deeper exploration of the facets of the social identity theory, which highlights how individuals enter and move within various dominant and non-dominant social groups.

Venezuela's Social-Based Democracy and the Chávez Presidency

The United States is the most sought after host country for international students, and each year the U.S. accepts thousands of scholars from various countries around the globe. Although South American students represent 2.9% of the total international student population in the United States (IIE, 2012), this region of the world should not be overlooked, especially since a steady increase of international students has been streaming into the U.S. from the small, northern South American country of Venezuela. A plethora of national changes have swept through the country of Venezuela since the 1998 presidential election affecting the social and educational realms, and at present the nation's 28,047,938 citizens (The World Factbook, 2012)

continue to palpably feel and react to their effects. Recent data strongly suggest that more Venezuelan students will be studying abroad in the United States in the near future. As previously mentioned, Venezuela was one of only five countries out of the top 25 places of origin to have an over 10% increase in international students studying in the U.S. from 2009/10 to 2010/11 (IIE, 2012). This number is on the rise due to Venezuela's ongoing state of political instability and the various controversial policy changes within the educational institutions in Venezuela; thereby, causing a country-wide "brain drain," meaning that large numbers of students and professionals are leaving their home country in search of better opportunities. Interestingly, data has shown that these international students from Venezuela are choosing to continue to live in the U.S. post graduation (Guanipa, Nolte & Guanipa, 2002) in order to avoid the sociopolitical discord in their home country. Therefore, the political composition and social/educational reforms of Venezuela that have been pushing university students abroad are significant to a study of the international Venezuelan student population and thereby, warrant further exploration.

Following the first presidential victory of Hugo Chávez in December 1998, numerous sociopolitical transformations and reforms began to greatly impact peoples' lives in the South American country of Venezuela (Ellner, 2011; Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011; Griffiths, 2010). However, before these changes can be examined, a brief history of Chávez's rise to power is both appropriate and necessary to set the stage for the impending discussion regarding the country's social and political transitions over the past 14 years. Beginning in 1982 and throughout the following decade, Chávez, who was serving as a military officer (Manzo, 2001), along with a band of others who supported his ideals, known as Chavistas, openly advocated for a new brand of socialism to replace the country's more liberal democracy. Chávez believed that

control of state power at the national level could truly promote change (Ellner, 2011). The Chavistas attempted an abortive military coup in 1992, and although the coup ultimately failed, (Ellner, 2011), the media attention given to Chávez may have contributed to his presidential election when he ran for office six years later. Although it is true that since the 1998 election the internal structure of the Venezuelan government has changed, the Chavistas, many of whom are members of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV), have “adhered to two fundamental rules of the established political system: electoral democracy and the acceptance of the system of political parties” (Ellner, 2011, p. 433). This is the reason why there are a plethora of political parties within the country at present, but none of them exercise as much influence and control as the PSUV under the Chavistas. However, despite the political conventions that remain, the Chavistas have ultimately promoted a new brand of socialism that is unique to Venezuela.

Under the Chávez Presidency, the Venezuelan government has implemented a social-based democracy. It should be stated that the term “social-based democracy” is relative and its components vary throughout different countries in Latin America. For example, the Venezuelan social-based democracy utilized in this study takes a different form than the social-based democracy utilized in Brazil or Chile. Therefore, for the purposes of this study the term refers to the strategy employed by Chavistas to incorporate, on a massive scale, the traditionally excluded, underprivileged social groups into the political, cultural, economic and educational sectors of the nation in order to obtain these groups’ participation in political decision making (Ellner, 2011). These aforesaid “excluded” groups are defined as those Venezuelan individuals who are: lacking employment in the formal economy, unable to read or write, or denied a university education (Ellner, 2011). In other words, the excluded are those who have been traditionally apathetic and

permeated with a sense of intense powerlessness (Ellner, 2011; Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). The inclusion of formerly excluded groups has played, and continues to play, a major role in the sociocultural transformation of the country. The two major facets of Venezuela's social-based democracy that promote this transformation include an "emphasis on social as opposed to economic objectives" (Ellner, 2011, p. 421) and the rapid inclusion of excluded groups of the population into the aforementioned national sectors in order to stimulate interest and enthusiasm for Chávez's social programs and missions in an attempt to "enhance the legitimacy of a government whose democratic credentials have been consistently questioned" (Ellner, 2011, p. 422). Therefore, this social-based democracy under the Chavista government has generated several national reforms that have favored the underprivileged, non-proletariat while turning away from the organized working class, especially within the business sector. For example, following his third election in 2006, President Chávez began nationalizing certain industries and selling a large number of smaller enterprises for different, indistinct reasons (Ellner, 2011). One Venezuelan citizen lamented, "The government is seizing privately owned companies and farms. Labor unions have been crushed. Political opponents are routinely harassed" (Margolis, 2009, p. 44). Multiple company owners were unsettled by the government takeover of various private industries, and such feelings of instability were further spurred as the government continued to make changes in other areas of peoples' lives. In addition to neglecting the working classes within the business sector, national policies under the Chavistas extended into the realm of education with the Higher Education for All policy and the Bolivarian Missions. These education-focused policies form an integral piece of the background context of the population of interest in this case study, because they explain the multiple social and political layers as to why

university students from Venezuela are currently emigrating into the U.S. in search of higher education.

Higher Education for All. Shortly after Chávez became president, electoral means were utilized to displace certain aspects of the government that the Chavistas viewed as obstacles to their social reform. Thus, in 1999 the Chavista's National Constituent Assembly displaced the National Congress until elections of the following year (Ellner, 2011). During the 1999 reforms, the national Constitution was revised to both increase authority to the executive branch and to re-name the country from the Republic of Venezuela to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (Muhr & Verger, 2006), so named after Simón Bolívar, the leader of the Venezuelan independence movement during the early 1800s (Manzo, 2001). Another constitutional revision granted universal education as a basic right to all high school graduates (Ellner, 2011), which promoted the government's 'Higher Education For All' (HEFA) policy (Muhr, 2010). HEFA rejects a higher education agenda of privatization and elitism while favoring solidarity, cooperation, and the idea that education at all levels is a fundamental human right (Muhr, 2010). The HEFA policy appeals to the excluded population because it "requires a holistic approach to higher education, which means that conditions for the inclusion of those historically excluded from higher education have to be created at the pre-tertiary levels" (Muhr, 2010, p. 50).

Bolivarian Missions. Immediately following Chavez's election, the Chavista movement began to stress and carry out its objective of assisting and involving the excluded, unrepresented masses of Venezuelans while remaining disinterested in the needs or interests of the industrial working class (Ellner, 2011; Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). According to Gonzalez & Oyelere (2011), a middle-class resident in the capital city of Caracas stated, "Things are worse than ever. You can't afford to live like to used to" (p. 1348). Such feelings of frustration and unrest spread

among the opposition, or those who strained against the Chavista government, and reached a boiling point, which resulted in an attempted coup of President Chávez in April 2002 and a 10-week strike by workers in a state-owned oil company from 2002-3 (Ellner, 2011; Griffiths, 2010). As a direct result of these anti-Chavista incidents, the government began to employ an array of social and political changes that had a more direct effect on all Venezuelans. During 2002-3, multiple social programs, or Missions, were implemented to appeal to the underprivileged masses, especially those in the *barrios*, or lower-class neighborhoods (Ellner, 2011). “President Hugo Chávez developed a number of educational, anti-poverty, electoral, and military recruiting programs known as the ‘Bolivarian Missions’” (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011, p. 1356). The Bolivarian Missions comprise over 30 universally accessible *misiones* (missions) in the social, health, political, and educational spheres (Muhr, 2012). However, out of the aforementioned missions, those in the social and educational spheres hold the most significance to this study because the former illustrates the value the Chavistas place on solidarity, cooperation and the excluded population within the local, and often underprivileged community setting, while the latter portrays how these values are pressed upon all of Venezuela, especially the youthful and impressionable student population, through educational means. Thus, both the social and educational missions will be expanded upon.

Social Missions. Through the Bolivarian Missions, government funding was able to enact the Law of Community Councils in April 2006 which stimulated financial support to aid in the creation of 30,000 community councils concentrated in underprivileged communities (Ellner, 2011). “The community councils design and execute public work projects in their communities and ensure preferential hiring for neighborhood residents” (Ellner, 2011, p. 424). After this law was put into place, thousands of community councils sprang into existence throughout the

nation. The councils each take in 200 to 400 families to meet in neighborhood assemblies in order to discuss, design, and implement various public works projects that were formerly executed by the municipal, state, or national government; therefore, this social program “has had the biggest impact in activating marginalized sectors of the population and facilitating their participation in decision-making” (Ellner, 2011, p. 429). However, the government’s support of the ideals of social-based democracy continued beyond the creation of these councils. Between 2004 and 2006, the government initiated a worker cooperative movement in which Chávez urged cooperative members to discard the ‘profit motive’ and to work on community projects without compensation (Ellner, 2011). This cooperative movement took in large numbers of poor individuals from the bottom rungs of society with no experience in the formal economy and provided them with administrative skill sets (Ellner, 2011). This particular sector of the Bolivarian Missions reflects the idea that the social-based democracy in Venezuela rests on the assumption that the state should “encourage the participation of marginalized sectors and their incorporation into experimental bodies such as cooperatives and community councils” (Ellner, 2011, p. 439).

Educational Missions. Perhaps the most intriguing and significant of these Bolivarian Missions is the educational component, which encompasses three programs that focus on the various levels of education: Robinson, (literacy and primary education), Ribas (secondary education) and Sucre (university education) (Ellner, 2011; Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011; Griffiths; 2010; Muhr, 2010). Carlos Lanz, former guerrilla and current supervisor of the National Education Project (*Proyecto Educativo Nacional*, PEN), which is a national program dedicated to renovating curriculums and teacher training in over 17,000 public schools (Manzo, 2001), wrote that the Bolivarian Missions embody a “Bolivarian” revolution within Venezuela and that this

movement “requires a campaign of permanent education for the formation of the exploited and the oppressed” (Lanz, 2006, p. 9, as cited in Ellner, 2011, p. 428). Similarly, the *Vuelvan Caras* (About Face) Mission is imperative to this development of the formerly excluded population because it serves the purpose of implementing 6-24 month training sessions to create facilitators to serve as teachers in all three educational Mission programs (Ellner, 2011). Unfortunately, due to these facilitators’ brief training sessions, some Venezuelans believe that the national government has sacrificed quality for the sake of quantity (Ellner, 2011; Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). Although these educational Missions caused controversy within all of Venezuela’s academic levels, perhaps the most consequential changes occurred at the tertiary level within Mission Sucre. This Mission attempted to transform and revolutionize Venezuelan values in higher education and ultimately became a push factor, driving university students into other countries to obtain and utilize their education.

Mission Sucre. In September 2003, President Chávez implemented a reform program known as *Misión Sucre* (Mission Sucre) to provide free mass tertiary education to the poor and excluded of Venezuela by eliminating entrance screening exams and providing an array of scholarships (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). In the nation’s past, the absence of loan and scholarship programs combined with a detailed admissions process had caused inequity in access and an overrepresentation of high-income families in Venezuela’s tuition free-public universities (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). Therefore, “Mission Sucre eliminated the centralized entrance exam, accepting all students who completed secondary education and giving special priority to students coming from the poorest sectors [...] and those who are unemployed” (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011, p. 1356). It can be inferred through the above example that Mission Sucre is

upholding the tenets of social-based democracy because it strives to include the “excluded” sector of the population.

Mission Sucre constructed the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (*Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela*, UBV) with campuses in multiple states to serve as the medium for the program (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). The UBV also created 11 experimental universities and 28 colleges around the nation (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). At present, the UBV boasts over 1,700 satellite campuses (known as Local Scopes of Alternative Socialist Education, ALDEAS) and 1,000 provisional campuses across the country (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). At its inception, Mission Sucre offered majors primarily centered on community participation and the betterment of society including social communications, social and community management, and political studies (Ellner, 2011; Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). However, these fields expanded in 2005 to include education, computer science, and health management (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). Nevertheless, Sucre still emphasizes the Bolivarian values of social cooperation and cohesiveness at the community level as illustrated by the following example. According to Ellner (2011), Mission Sucre students participate in courses called ‘projects’ “in which they gather information and participate in activities at the neighborhood level, and, in some cases, design proposals used by the community councils to apply for state funding” (p. 429). However, an issue of even greater concern than Mission Sucre’s organization and offered majors regards the implementation of less stringent academic requirements for entry and lax academic expectations throughout the duration of one’s term in a Sucre university (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011), and a great deal of Venezuelans argue that the quality of institutions of higher learning is diminishing.

Institutional Quality. Despite the fact that students enrolled in Mission Sucre programs have been given an opportunity to obtain knowledge and skills beyond the secondary level in an

effort to improve their lives, the reality is that unlike their counterparts at regular universities, Mission Sucre students lack the resources, high grades, and influence to enter the traditional university system and progress at a normal pace (Ellner, 2011). Sucre Missions do not possess an organized infrastructure, and in most cities, these Missions also lack a proper campus environment, so classes are held at night in various public school buildings (Ellner, 2011). This reduction in university quality is also illustrated by the absence of entrance exams, which former applicants to either public or private Venezuelan universities had to pass before beginning their tertiary education (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). Prior to 2003, all college-aspiring graduating high school students took a general exam called the *Prueba de Aptitud Académica* (PAA) or the Academic Aptitude test (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). Beyond the PAA, private institutions required additional screening, while public university applicants experienced the national admissions process, which was based on an index of high school grades, the PAA score, and socioeconomic characteristics (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). However, Mission Sucre campuses bypass the aforementioned admission processes and require only a high school diploma in exchange for admittance (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). “This lack of screening clearly leads to a reduction in the quality of the students admitted,” (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011, p. 1357) and this lack of quality is also reflected in two other facets of Mission Sucre. First, this Mission has shortened the traditional college curriculum from five to three years, thusly withholding imperative academic experiences from students. Second, Sucre provides undertrained faculty of low pedagogic quality who instruct without proper teaching materials (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). Interestingly, in spite of the lower overall quality of education offered by Mission Sucre programs as highlighted by the literature, the gross enrollment in tertiary education increased from 29% in 1995 to 41% in 2007 (Gonzalez & Oyelere, 2011). However, regardless of the

quantitative data that proclaims elevated numbers of enrollment within the sector of Venezuelan higher education, it does not diminish the fact that these changes are not well received by all students, pushing these students to seek university education elsewhere.

University Students and the Educational Brain Drain. According to the 1975 United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare's report on education in Venezuela, "University is the oldest and most important institution of Venezuelan higher education" (p. 11), and now, 37 years later, this once optimistic outlook on education has shifted. "Many Venezuelans believe that Venezuelan higher education has lost sense of mission for the future. It appears unable to keep in focus its policy of developing human resources [...] or of keeping in touch with the real needs of the country" (Pedersen, et al., 2000, p 187). This governmental sacrifice of educational quality and institutional organization may be due to the values of social-based democracy promoted by the Chavistas because Ellner (2011) states that social-based democracy promotes flexibility and rejects strong institutions to avoid discouraging participation by those who lack experience in the realms of politics or education (or those from the excluded sectors of society). Therefore, the traditional university students are pushed aside since the government's programs favor the underprivileged. This has created contempt and dissatisfaction in a number of university students because, "The 'losers' are the students in the traditional public and private universities who end up having to compete in the labor market with the Mission graduates, whose diplomas [...] drive salaries down" (Ellner, 2011, p. 431).

The Missions' adverse effect on students at established universities undeniably contributed to those students' discontent, mobilizations against the Chavistas and their migration out of the country. Such contempt for the government has even resulted in outbreaks of violence. In March 2001, there was a violent clash between student protestors and their Chavista peers at

the Central University of Venezuela in the capital city of Caracas that resulted in serious injuries (Wheeler, MacWilliams, Lawrence, Watzman & Kigotho, 2001). The culmination of years of lower quality education, competition with Sucre graduates, and the implementation of Bolivarian values under Chávez have pushed both students and those in the work force out of the country, resulting in a brain drain. According to Feliciano (2005), a brain drain becomes a reality when the out-migration of the highly educated and the professionals deprives a country of resources (such as leadership), which may hinder the future progress of the country. Tens of thousands of professionals and students are leaving Venezuela in droves, and the outrush of Venezuelan brainpower is gutting universities and crippling industries (Margolis, 2009). An estimated 1 million Venezuelans have moved abroad in the decade since Chávez took power in 1999 (Margolis, 2009). Due to federal international scholarship programs and multiple private educational exchange programs available in the country, some of which were established prior to the election of Chávez, many Venezuelan students have taken advantage of access to international education (Guanipa et al., 2002). The majority of these international students from Venezuela tend to study in Canada or the United States, and some choose to stay in the host country (Guanipa et al., 2002) versus returning to the climate of uncertainty and instability within the home country. A less pronounced, but highly important factor that also pushes individuals to migrate out of Venezuela is the implementation of Bolivarian values and how they are overshadowing the traditional Venezuelan values of familism and humorism; therefore, these issues warrant further discussion.

Bolivarian Values. In 2006, Chávez announced that his Bolivarian government was to reflect '*moral y luces*' ('morality and illumination'), which he defined as promoting education with socialist values in all spaces (Ellner, 2011). These values favor the formerly excluded

sectors of the population (Ellner, 2011) and privilege solidarity and the common good (Griffiths, 2010) while ignoring the growing needs of the working class. To the dismay of some Venezuelans, “the Venezuelan government appears to have argued that the socialist values required to carry through its political project must be developed through its systems of education” (Griffiths, 2010, p. 615). For over a decade, Venezuelan citizens have watched their traditional values become overshadowed by the sociopolitical agenda of the Chavistas, as schools and universities have shifted to become spaces where social actors who support Chávez are created. At present, it appears these Bolivarian values are within and extending out from the realm of education and aiding in the transformation of society. Many Venezuelan citizens believe that society is becoming split into two groups: those who agree with and those who disagree with Chavez’s agenda and ideals, and this division is pushing the long upheld and traditional Venezuelan values of family and humorism into the background.

Traditional Values. Family has always played a critical role in the Venezuelan value system (Guanipa et al., 2002) because family is the social unit wherein strong interpersonal relationships and support flourish. The concept of “family” however extends beyond the immediate family members to encompass grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and *compadres* and *comadres*, or people who are extremely close to a family (Carballo-Diequez, 1989). This extension of the immediate family to acquire “new” family members for emotional support is known as fictive kin (Lopez, 1999). The family unit in Venezuela provides a network of individuals who offer support and advice because affiliation and cooperation are stressed within the culture since collectivism is preferred over individualism within Latino families (Carballo-Diequez, 1989; Comas-Días, 1989). Children are able to depend upon their parents in difficult circumstances because honesty and emotional closeness are fundamental Venezuelan values that

form strong family ties (Padilla, 1981). Parents may also provide social and human capital to children (Nieto & Bode, 2008), meaning that parents endow their children with the social network connections, education and skill sets necessary to succeed in life (Coleman, 1988). Activities surrounding family developmental and life milestones are prioritized and all family members should participate in events such as baptisms, weddings, anniversaries, funerals and holiday celebrations (Comas-Días, 1989). No matter what circumstances a family experiences, each member is expected to cherish this value of *familismo*, or familism. *Personalismo* is also an imperative part of Latino culture, and it refers to the importance placed on personal goodness, getting along with others, and valuing personal character and positive inner qualities (Ramirez, 1990). Humorism is another widely accepted Venezuelan value and it is essential to daily living. To those unfamiliar with the humor of Venezuelans, some jokes may seem inappropriate. For instance, if a man calls his wife “*gordita*” or little fat one, this is not an insult but in fact a term of endearment (Guanipa, et al., 2002). “Humor is simply a common way to relate among family members and reflects the generally optimistic philosophy of life that prevails among Venezuelans” (Guanipa et al., 2002, p. 431). These incredibly precious Venezuelan values of familism, personalismo and humorism have been challenged in recent years due to the ideals implemented by the Chavistas, the aforementioned sociopolitical reforms and the national insecurity, and all of these conditions have pushed masses of Venezuelan emigrants out of the country; thereby, causing these individuals to experience the phenomenon of acculturation within the host environment. Acculturation, which is the focus of this thesis, is the issue to which the literature review now turns.

The Psychology of Acculturation

Acculturation is defined as the cultural change that results from continuous, firsthand contact between two or more distinct and autonomous cultural groups (Berry 1988; 1990; 2005). The process of acculturation falls within the realm of cross-cultural psychology since acculturation examines the psychological adaptations and changes made by individuals when they move between cultures (Berry, 1990; 2005). Over the past two decades, cross-cultural psychology has researched and explored a relatively novel domain that seeks to understand “continuities and changes in individual behavior that are related to the experience of two cultures through the process of acculturation” (Berry, 1990, p. 232). According to Berry (1990), there are three key elements identified in cross-cultural psychology that are reflected within the process of acculturation. First, there needs to be continuous firsthand *contact* or interaction between two distinct cultures. Second, this contact must result in some *change* in the cultural, social or psychological phenomena among the individuals in contact. Third, there is activity, or a *process*, occurring both during and after contact that is dynamic and may include outcomes that could change or create new social, cultural or psychological phenomena within acculturating groups or individuals. This section now turns to a more in-depth exploration of the acculturation framework and its various components.

Acculturation Framework

The acculturation framework (Figure 1.) outlines and connects cultural and psychological acculturation occurring at both group and individual levels (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 2011). At the group level, two distinct cultures (i.e., A and B) interact, and Culture A and Culture B both influence each other. It is important to note that in principle, the framework of acculturation acknowledges the reciprocity of the influence two cultural groups have on one another during

contact, but “in practice one tends to dominant the other, leading to a distinction between dominant and non-dominant group” (Berry et al., 2011, p. 313).

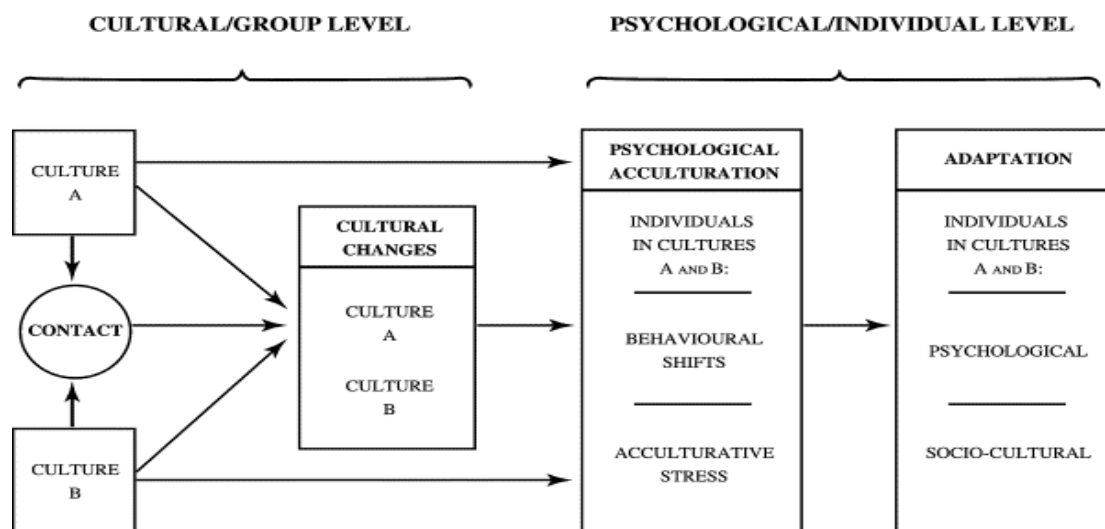


Figure 1: Acculturation Framework (Source: Berry, 2005, p.703).

Exploring mutual influence is significant, but beyond the scope of this study; therefore, this research exclusively focuses on the individuals receiving the greater influence (i.e., acculturating individuals). As aforementioned, in practice, one group tends to dominate the other; and in this framework the “dominant” or “donor” group is represented by Culture A and the “acculturating” or “receptor” group is represented by Culture B (Berry, 1990; 2005). One result of the contact between Culture A (dominant) and Culture B (acculturating) is that Culture B (and the individuals within it) will undergo a cultural transformation and begin to accept cultural/social features and aspects of the dominant group, especially if this contact is maintained over a longer period of time (Berry, 1990). This cultural transformation is a phenomenon that occurs at the individual level because during the acculturation process, individuals undergo psychological changes of attitudes, values and identity (Berry, 1990), particularly if cross-cultural contact is prolonged.

It is also imperative to consider particular characteristics pertaining to both Culture A and Culture B. The most essential characteristic to note about dominant Culture A, according to Berry (1990; 2005), is the nature of it as the host society. In other words, is this dominant culture inclusive to non-dominant groups? Is it a pluralistic society, meaning that it is able to tolerate and accept cultural diversity (Berry, 1990), or not? In regards to the acculturating Culture B, it is important to consider the purpose of the inter-cultural contact (work, study, family reunification, etc.), the length of stay (permanent or temporary) and Culture B's sociocultural qualities (languages, norms, behaviors) that may affect the acculturation process (Berry 1990). Besides the aforementioned characteristics, a second distinction must be made between group level and individual level phenomenon. In 1967, the term "psychological acculturation" was coined to refer to the changes that an individual experiences as a consequence from being in direct contact with another culture (Berry, 1990). This distinction between group level acculturation and psychological acculturation is imperative because different changes occur within both levels. At the group level, changes occur on a grand scale, encompassing social structure, economic practices and political organization (Berry, 1990), while at the individual or psychological acculturation level, changes can occur in one's behavior, identity, values, and attitudes (Berry, 1990). However, acculturation levels vary with each individual because "not every person in the acculturating group will necessarily enter into the acculturation process in the same way or to the same degree" (Berry, 1990, p. 239).

Furthermore, although acculturation was originally proposed as a group-level phenomenon, it is now widely recognized as an individual level phenomenon (Berry et al., 1987). Berry (2005) states, "a key feature of all acculturation phenomena is the variability with which they take place: there are large [...] individual differences in the ways in which people

seek to go about their acculturation” (p. 700). Therefore, although it is preferred to consider and study acculturative change through a holistic lens, which would include both the individual (psychological) and group levels, the majority of recent literature on the topic focuses on how individuals of different ethnicities, nationalities and life circumstances experience acculturation. So, although a close examination of both individual and group levels is preferred (Berry, 1990), such an assessment is beyond the scope of the current study. For that reason, this study will focus on the acculturative experiences of six individual international students from Venezuela and how their behaviors, values and identities are affected by the new culture, versus how Cultures A and B influence one another on a grander scale. Therefore, although the aforementioned information regarding the group association between Cultures A and B through the acculturation framework is significant, it is imperative to note that there are three main perspectives of individual change (as illustrated in the right side of Figure 1.) that can occur during the acculturation process: affective, behavioral, and cognitive (Berry et al., 2011).

Affective Perspective. This perspective highlights emotional aspects of acculturation and focuses on issues related to psychological well being (Berry et al., 2011). The affective perspective is linked to acculturative stress and the idea that acculturation can be likened to a set of changes and life events that pose challenges and inflict stressors upon an individual; consequently, these stressors evoke an individual to utilize various coping strategies and rely upon social supports in order to stabilize and reduce the stresses caused by acculturation (Berry et al., 2011). Usually the stresses that can negatively affect the emotional and psychological well-being of an acculturating individual are related to the fact that the social and cultural norms, values and behaviors of the host society may be dramatically different than one’s home society. Berry et al. (1987) proposed an acculturative stress model which suggests that when serious

sociocultural challenges are experienced during the acculturation process, and these challenges are considered to be problematic because one is not able to deal with them by simply changing one's behavior, then acculturative stress results, making one feel emotionally and psychologically insecure. This perspective corresponds to the “acculturative stress” and “psychological” components of Figure 1.

Behavioral Perspective. Acculturating individuals may lack the social skills and interpersonal behaviors necessary to engage and interact with the new host culture. This lack of knowledge of social norms or skills may result in difficulties managing everyday social encounters with members of the host culture (Berry et al., 2011). Therefore, the behavioral perspective of acculturation encompasses how individuals are expected to learn or acquire culture-specific skills (such as language), conventions, norms and practices that are needed to interact with and learn about the host culture (Berry et al., 2011). For instance, an acculturating individual will have to learn the appropriate way to conduct daily activities such as obtaining goods and communicating with various members of the population if he or she hopes to “fit in” with the dominant culture. This perspective corresponds to the “behavioral shifts” component of Figure 1.

Cognitive Perspective. Whereas the behavioral and affective perspectives of acculturation are concerned with daily encounters, behavioral change, and stressful situations, the cognitive perspective is concerned with how individuals perceive and think about themselves and others in the face of intercultural differences (Berry, et al., 2011). “Cognitive aspects mostly refer to how people process information about their own group (ingroup) and about other groups (outgroups), including how people categorize one another and how people identify with these categories” (Berry et al., 2011, p. 316). When experiencing the process of acculturation and

intercultural contact, an individual asks the questions, “Who am I?” and “Which social group do I belong to?” (Berry, 2007). These two questions create the basis of what Berry et al. (2011) call “one of the most influential theoretical positions within the cognitive approaches: social identity theory” (p. 316). Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1972) is concerned with why and how individuals identify with certain social groups and it argues that individuals need to belong to a group in order to secure a sense of well-being. The social identity theory will be discussed in more detail in following sections. The cognitive perspective of acculturation, which highlights how individuals categorize and associate with social groups within different cultures, corresponds with both the “socio-cultural” and “psychological” components of Figure 1.

Acculturation Strategies. Berry (1988; 1990; 2005; et al., 2011) proposed four acculturation strategies that have been derived from two basic issues facing all acculturating peoples, and these issues are based upon the distinction between one’s orientation towards and association with his or her own sociocultural group and his or her association with a new sociocultural group. In other words, the acculturation strategy one utilizes depends upon one’s preference for maintaining one’s heritage culture and one’s preference for having contact with and participating in the larger host society (Berry, 2005). Depending upon the amount of interaction and communication the acculturating individual has with the heritage and host cultures, that individual falls into one of the following four acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization (Berry, 1988; 1990; 2005; Berry & Kim, 1987; Berry et al., 2011). The first acculturation strategy, assimilation, refers to those individuals who seek to fully become a part of the host society and culture. The second strategy of integration includes individuals who seek to maintain relationships with co-nationals and the host culture. The third acculturation strategy of separation contains those individuals who avoid interaction with the

host society and culture. Lastly, individuals who possess little interest in cultural maintenance or establishing relations with the new culture utilize the fourth and final acculturation strategy of marginalization. Berry (1990) describes marginalization as a situation when one is on the margin of two cultures, being neither accepted nor supported by either one, and this strategy, along with separation, are the least favorable and tend to cause higher amounts of acculturative stress than assimilation or integration. Berry (1990) states that it is possible for an individual to utilize different acculturation strategies in various life domains. For instance, “one may seek economic assimilation (in work), linguistic integration (by way of bilingualism) and marital separation (by endogamy)” (Berry, 1990, p. 245).

Acculturating Groups. Even though every person living in a pluralistic society is undergoing some form of acculturation, cross-cultural research has deemed the following groups as undergoing intense acculturation: indigenous peoples, ethnocultural groups, immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and sojourners (Berry, 1990; 2005; Berry et al., 2011). Before explaining each group in more detail, it must be stated that these six groups differ because each is composed of various combinations of three distinctions. The first is degree of voluntariness: a group may choose or be forced to move or integrate within a new society (Berry, 1990; Berry et al., 2011). The second distinction is migration: some groups remain on home ground while others emigrate and settle far from their homeland (Berry, 1990; Berry et al., 2011). The third distinction is permanence of contact: some groups settle permanently in a new place, while others stay temporarily (Berry, 1990, Berry et al., 2011). Combinations of these three distinctions have provided researchers with insight into the aforementioned six acculturation groups to study, although sometimes these distinctions vary across groups and shift within contemporary society (Berry et al., 2011). Indigenous peoples are those who are largely involuntary, sedentary and the

sociocultural roots of their culture extend through many past generations. Ethnocultural groups contain peoples with a long history in a society who are the descendants of earlier waves of immigrants who have settled into recognizable groups, and these people have a sense of their own cultural heritage. Immigrants are peoples who voluntarily leave their home country and society in order to seek out a better life by permanently settling in a new society. Refugees and asylum-seekers are typically forced to leave their homelands and their stay within a new society may be either temporary or permanent. Finally, sojourners are peoples who (typically) freely choose to move to a new society/culture temporarily. Therefore, international students fall into the category of sojourners because they travel to study (often with the goal of obtaining a degree) for a period of time, ranging from several weeks to several years. Interestingly, Church (1982) categorizes sojourners into three types (which are incredibly reflective of Berry's (1990, 2005) acculturative strategies). Church (1982) states that sojourners fall on a continuum of adjustment because some may be more socially conservative and identify strongly with the home culture (separation), while others may tend to be more involved with host nationals (assimilation), and lastly some sojourners may represent an integrative approach to a new society by adapting to new behaviors and norms upon the foundation of their home culture.

The decision for each of the aforementioned groups to move to a new location or country is often based upon some prior knowledge, contact, or influence (Berry, 1990). This "influence" falls into two categories for migrating peoples: "push" and "pull" factors. "Push" factors are those that have a negative impact in one's own sociocultural environment, leading an individual to make the decision to migrate in order to avoid unfavorable situations (Berry, 1990). For example, the various national reforms and policies on higher education may have "pushed" multiple Venezuelan students to leave their home country to study abroad. "Pull" factors are

those that have a positive impact on an individual in the new sociocultural environment (Berry, 1990), leading one to decide to migrate in order to obtain a higher quality of life. In the case of Venezuelan international students, many may have been “pulled” abroad by various opportunities offered by the host country, such as practicing and learning a different language; experiencing a new culture firsthand; or obtaining and utilizing a quality, university education. According to Obst & Forster (2012), the majority of international students sojourn to the U.S. to experience new ways of thinking and acting in their field of study in order to increase their chance of obtaining an international career and to seize the opportunity to become more independent.

Acculturative Stress

Regardless of which acculturation strategy is utilized or to which acculturating group an individual belongs, living within a new dominant society can be problematic, producing acculturative stress as manifested by uncertainty, marginality, identity confusion and anxiety (Berry, 2005). “During acculturation, groups of people and their individual members engage in intercultural contact, producing a potential for conflict [stress], and the need for negotiation in order to achieve outcomes that are adaptive” (Berry, 2005, p. 697). Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok (1987) generated an acculturative stress model, which highlights how the acculturation experience can affect the levels of individual acculturative stress. The amount of acculturative stress one experiences varies and could either be viewed by an individual as unwelcome anxiety or an opportunity to adapt to a new culture depending on the three concepts and five moderating factors as depicted by the model in Figure 2. The first concept (located in the upper left of the figure) is the acculturation experience, which highlights the degrees to which an individual participates in and experiences the new culture and society. The second concept (illustrated in

the upper middle of the figure) depicts stressors that may result from acculturation experiences and may include difficulty with the host language, norms, etc. The third concept (located in the upper right of the figure) reflects the level of acculturative stress that may become manifest as a result of experiences and stressors in the host culture, meaning that an individual could experience high or low levels of anxiety, marginalization, etc. It is important to note that these three concepts are probabilistic, not deterministic (Berry, 1990; 2005), because their relationship depends upon the influence of five moderating factors and “Each of the factors can influence the degree and direction of the relationship between the three variables at the top of the figure” (Berry, 1990, p. 247).

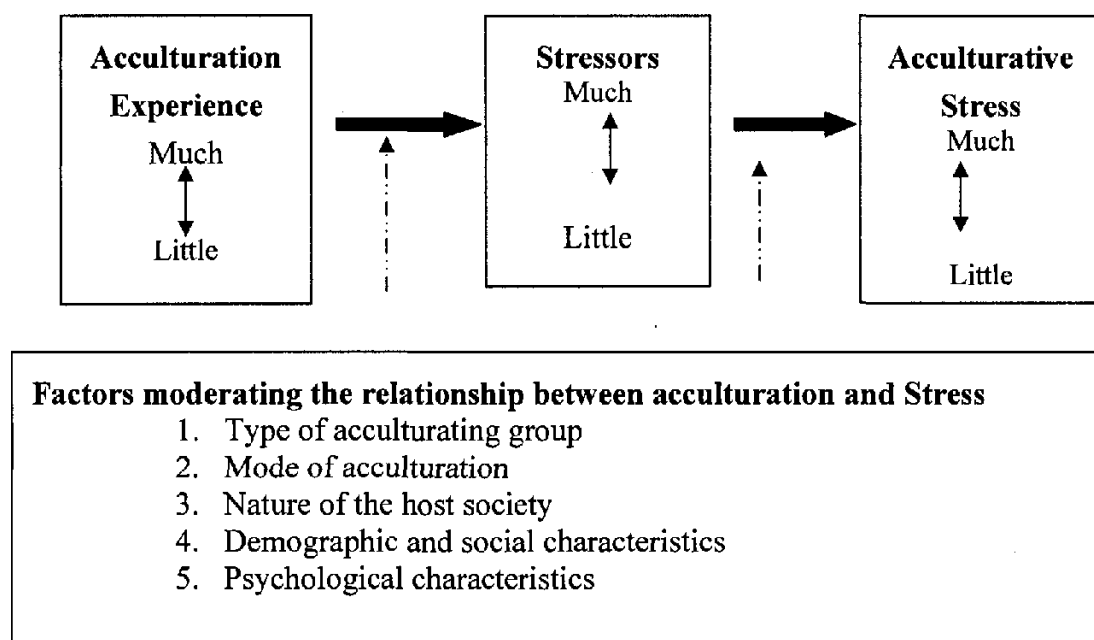


Figure 2: Acculturative Stress Model (Source: Berry et al., 1987, p. 493).

The five factors moderating the relationship between acculturation experience, stressors and stress levels include: type of acculturating group, mode of acculturation, nature of larger society, demographic and social characteristics of the individual, and psychological

characteristics of the individual (Berry et al., 1987). The first moderating factor refers to the acculturating group (immigrant, sojourner, refugee, etc) that the acculturating individual belongs to. The second moderating factor, the mode of acculturation, refers to the acculturation strategy (integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization) that is utilized by the acculturating individual. Although Berry et al. (1987; 2011) stress that the type of acculturation strategy one utilizes within the new culture depends primarily upon one's individual choice, there are several other factors that influence this process, particularly future goals, human and social capital, and perceived discrimination from the host culture. In a qualitative study, Colic-Peisker & Walker (2003) state that the acculturation strategy an acculturating individual chooses is determined largely by the goals, social capital (family networks, social networks within the host culture) and human capital (cultural skills, formal education, proficiency with the host language) one possesses. These factors will be addressed in the sections that follow. The third moderating factor centers on the nature of the host society, meaning is the host society pluralistic (possesses greater tolerance for cultural diversity) or monistic (does not tolerate or accept groups that differ from itself).

Demographic and social characteristics of the individual represent the fourth moderating factor and consist of several parts: age, gender, and the social capital (i.e., social supports/networks) of the acculturating person. Typically, relatively older persons and females have frequently been noted, throughout various qualitative research studies, to experience higher levels of stress during the acculturative process (Berry, 1990; 2005; Berry et al., 2011; Senyshyn, Warford & Zhan, 2000; Tomich, McWhirter & King, 2000). Coleman (1988) defines social capital as social networks and relationships among people that are based on organization and trust; therefore, social capital is included in the social characteristics of an acculturating

individual. Berry (1990) states, “Perhaps the most comprehensive variable in the literature is that of social supports. This refers to the presence of social and cultural institutions for the support of the acculturating individual” (p. 250) and these “social supports” encompass ethnic associations (local and international), extended family, enclaves (Berry, 1990) and newfound relationships within the host society.

Human capital is one of the components reflected in the final moderating factor, psychological characteristics of the individual. Coleman (1988) defines human capital as the knowledge, skill sets, and education level achieved by an individual, and human capital is reflected in the acculturative stress model because Berry (1990) explains that the psychological variables of the stress model include “prior knowledge of the new language and culture, prior intercultural encounters of any kind, motives for the contact [...] one’s level of education and employment” (p. 251). Berry (2006) states that education is a correlate of other resources for acculturating individuals because it allows them to establish support networks and permits them to explore features of the host society such as norms, values and language. Coping strategies utilized by an acculturating individual (i.e., learning the new language, forming social networks) and perceived discrimination also fall into the psychological category of individual acculturation (Berry, 1990; 2005; Wadsworth, Hecht & Jung, 2008). Perceived discrimination causes stress for an acculturating individual because it involves overt and covert actions to exclude, avoid and distance another person and is often based on race, ethnicity, or English language skills (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Berry (1990) also states that the personal goals (the congruity between expectations and actualities) of an acculturating individual may play a role in stress levels as well by affecting one’s psychological health. If one aspires to or expects more than they obtain during

acculturation, that person may have greater acculturative stress than those who believe they can (and do) achieve some reasonable and attainable goal (Berry, 1990).

Therefore, the combinations of these five factors that moderate the relationship between the acculturation experience stressors and stress levels have different effects on an individual's overall well being. However, Berry (2005) notes, “For acculturative stress, there is a clear picture that the pursuit of integration is the least stressful when accommodated by larger society” (p. 708). It is proposed that those individuals who pursue the acculturation strategy of integration, by maintaining relationships with their home culture while interacting with the host culture, will achieve better adaptation into the host society than those who acculturate using the strategies of separation, assimilation, or marginalization. Berry (1990; 2005) also states that sojourners and immigrants migrating into new societies have will have a less stressful acculturation experience than that of refugees or asylum seekers. In the same vein, those acculturating individuals migrating into a pluralistic society or who possess knowledge of the host culture and language will fare better than individuals migrating into a monistic society or individuals who have very little prior knowledge of the host society (Berry, 1990; 2005).

Acculturative Stress and International Students in the U.S.

According to Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping and Todman (2008), students attending universities in a culture and society different from their own have to contend with new educational and social institutions, organizations, behaviors, and expectations. All of these factors can combine to make an international student in the United States feel overwhelmed and experience adjustment problems, resulting in acculturative stress. During cross-cultural contact, people tend to perceive themselves differently (within the context of the larger host society) and this can lead to stress, anxiety, social isolation, and identity confusion (Berry, 1990; Zhou et al.,

2008). Sojourners, as an acculturating group, differ in the degree to which they individually experience certain problems such as language barriers, financial difficulties, homesickness, and discrimination (Church, 1982). Although there are multiple stresses that befall international students as they interact with others within the U.S. host culture in various settings and situations, multiple qualitative research studies (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Halic et al, 2009; McLachlan & Justice, 2009) have revealed that the stresses of these students fall into four main categories (that often overlap): English proficiency, cultural/social, academic, and financial. This section will pay particular attention to the cultural norms, specific acculturative stresses and favored coping strategies of the Latino international student population since the focus of this study revolves around the individual lived experience of scholars from Venezuela; thus, the Latino international student population should be highlighted.

English Proficiency. One of the most significant sources of stress that international students face is related to a lack of English proficiency and an overall struggle with the language. English language proficiency was widely recognized as one of the major adjustment issues for international students and these students encountered great difficulties in communicating with others in English, especially in academic settings due to differences in accent, enunciation and slang (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991). According to Tung (2011), limited English proficiency is a primary concern for international students and it has a significant effect on their cultural adjustment and academic performance. Within the classroom setting, countless international students have difficulties expressing their ideas or verbalizing their answers during in-class discussions (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006), and this can lead to increased stress levels. In a qualitative study focusing on the adjustment of international students by Tseng & Newton (2002), one international student attending Kansas State University stated, “The most important thing is

language. Language is your way in, once you know the language, the door is open for you” (p. 591). McLachlan & Justice (2009) reported the thoughts of one undergraduate international student, “School was really... it was terrifying. I was barely [speaking] English when I came” (p. 30).

In a phenomenological research study conducted by Halic et al. (2009), Ricardo, an international student from Venezuela studying in the U.S., shared the following perspective about his feelings when he is not on campus with Americans and no longer has to speak English, “I’m always making mistakes [in English], grammar mistakes [...] and when I catch those mistakes I try to go back and say the word again or something like that, but I don’t need to do that in Spanish, or course. So that feels really good. That’s the feeling of freedom” (p. 81). Ricardo’s quote illustrates the challenge that many Latino international students associate with learning the English language, and how their previous learning did not prepare them for the difficulties of using the language with native speakers. The following quote from a qualitative study by Li, et al. (2007) highlights how Blanca, a graduate student from Mexico studying in the U.S., often becomes frustrated with English slang, “I did not expect that people here like to say, ‘make sense’ and ‘figure out’ if they are trying to understand something” (p. 11). Blanca goes on to share, “Based on my personal experience and the stories told by many other international students from Latin America with whom I have shared experiences, the training we received in English in our home countries was a waste of time” (p. 12). All of the aforementioned student quotes highlight how individuals can approach the language element of acculturation with unique perspectives and attitudes. However, regardless of how one chooses to approach the language of the host culture, confidence in one’s ability to speak English represents one of the most challenging and problematic areas of adjusting to university life (Senyshyn et al., 2000).

Cultural/Social Differences. Cultural and social differences are another major source of acculturative stress for international students in the U.S. “Culture shock” is a term that refers to the anxiety and disorientation precipitated by change in one’s environment (such as moving to a new country) and losing familiar cultural practices and social intercourses (Oberg, 1960). Each international student encounters this “shock” by experiencing cultural elements, be it clothes, food, or behaviors, that differ in some way from their home culture, and this occurrence consequently generates varying levels of stress. Another interesting element pertaining to the stressor of cultural differences is the idea that the degree to which one’s home culture overlaps with that of the host culture impacts the depth and swiftness of adaptation to the new environment (Tomich, et al., 2000). In other words, if the heritage culture of an individual and the host culture have more differences than similarities in multiple aspects (food, clothing, language, behaviors, norms, etc) then an international student, or other acculturating individual, may experience more stress (Berry, 1990; 2005). The study by Li et al. (2007) portrays the experience of a Mexican international student who describes that collectivism and family are more important to Latino culture than the individualism practiced in the U.S., “Latin American people are by ‘nature’ very close. Neighbors and family members are always available to help each other. Being in a foreign country causes Latinos to become even closer to each other” (p. 32).

International students studying in the U.S. may also experience feelings of social isolation from the dominant culture. Studies in higher education suggest that international students experience social isolation due to the lack of contact with host nationals and are often lonely (Sabie, 1975). This isolation can evolve from the anxiety and trepidation an acculturating individual may experience because he or she is unfamiliar with the host culture’s language or

norms; therefore this fear inhibits cross-cultural interaction. Isolation from the dominant culture branches quite directly from the stress inducing elements of difficulty with the English language, salient cultural dissimilarities, or students not comprehending/practicing rules of the host culture. “Lack of social interaction with nationals may be due to the lack of cultural access and cues necessary for communication, such as eye contact, body space, and body language” (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006, p. 68). Perceived discrimination also impedes the formation or maintenance of social networks between international students and members of the host society (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Discrimination is a pervasive experience for a minority in the U.S., which can lead to serious psychological stress and decrease the quality of one’s educational experience abroad because if an international student feels discriminated against by a peer, he or she may feel less comfortable expressing themselves (Wadsworth et al., 2008) either in or outside of the classroom setting. In the Latino context, Ricardo, a Venezuelan international student, describes how Americans show discrimination towards him, “When I go to the university they usually know that I am a foreigner and they try to speak slow” (Halic et al., 2009, p. 85). Generally, various qualitative research studies emphasize that international students feel lonely and disconnected at times from the U.S. host culture.

Academic Difficulties. International students sojourn to the United States for the purpose of studying abroad in order to obtain a quality education that will assist them in the current global economy; therefore, a majority of these students are disconcerted when they discover that an array of academic challenges may hinder the “quality” of their educational experience. International students often face issues when adapting to new or foreign learning norms and behaviors in American university classrooms (Tung, 2011) such as the curriculum structure, the increased amount of written and oral assignments, and the expectation of student participation

(Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Stresses also develop because students may not be used to the fast-paced, student centered instruction (Zhai, 2002) or the individualistic teaching methods (Wadsworth et al., 2008) that are often utilized in the U.S. classroom setting. Many students also admit that a lack of English proficiency is an obstacle to classroom learning, and as aforementioned, this can be a great struggle for Latin American international students. One Latino student called Ed shares his frustration, “Back in Brazil I’m really good at writing, I write really fast. But I was working on this exam, and the exam was not difficult, but getting the words organized in a different language [...] it took me forever to finish the exam” (Halic et al., 2009, p. 87). This language barrier interferes with one’s in-class participation by inhibiting: posing/answering questions, contributing ideas during full class discussions, or communicating concerns with peers or instructors (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006). An issue of even greater concern for international students studying in the U.S. is the intense pressure to perform well academically and keep a high GPA in order to maintain scholarships and as an effort to please one’s family in the home country (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). This fear of low grades may result in the international student choosing to return to the home country and risk severely disappointing their family members (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Therefore, the intense pressure to perform well in the realm of academia is a precursor for acculturative stress for the international student population.

Financial Difficulties. A study performed by McLachlan & Justice (2009) highlights the idea that international students from all areas of the globe experience financial pressures while sojourning in the U.S. These students were faced with an array of purchases (food, books, tuition, rent, transportation, etc) and oftentimes they reported that the financial resources accessible on campus used to obtain or transfer currency were insufficient (Zhai, 2002).

International students may also seek to acquire and maintain part-time or full time jobs on campus in order to achieve a sense of financial stability and independence, but this proves to be a difficult task for many, due either to discrimination or the small amount of jobs available.

Acculturating individuals commonly experience lack of support or even discrimination in the job market and adapting to a new work environment (regardless of the field) is stressful when faced with new norms and behaviors in the workplace (Berry et al., 2011). However, studies have shown that if an acculturating individual is better adapted to the host culture in other life domains such as school, extracurricular or recreational activities, than that individual reports being more satisfied with their overall employment conditions (Berry et al., 2011).

Coping Strategies of International Students in the U.S. In order for international students studying in the U.S. to manage the pressures of the acculturation process and stresses that result from them, coping strategies may be utilized. However, even though acculturative stress is a reality for many international students, stress, anxiety and depression are not universal (Church, 1982), just as some students utilize healthier coping strategies than others. “Some individuals possess a variety of coping strategies that allow them to adapt successfully to acculturation (low acculturative stress) while others are unable to cope, leading to high acculturative stress” (Berry et al., 1987, p. 495). Several research studies have reported that international students use social interactions to aid with the development and preservation of host and heritage social networks as their primary coping strategy (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Li et al., 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). Ward, Bochner & Furnham (2001) describe a functional model of friendship networks that are utilized by international students. This model contains three main strands of social networks including a network with the home culture and other co-nationals from the home country, a network with non-conational

international students, and a third network may be established with host nationals (peers, teachers) in the host culture. Establishing social support networks with some or all of these groups is the method most heavily utilized by international students to cope with the stresses of acculturating to life in the U.S.

Social Support Network: Home Culture and International Students. Many international students seek to maintain and form social support networks with members of their heritage cultures (both in home and host countries) and other international students. “Although participants recognized the need to seek friendships with American students to acculturate, they described friendships in their cultures as developing sooner and more spontaneously. They remarked they had more international student friends and friends from their home country” (McLachlan & Justice, 2009, p. 30). One of Zhai’s (2002) qualitative research studies revealed that the majority of the international students shared that they usually consulted their fellow international students regarding their personal concerns because those students often spoke the same language, shared the same culture, and were experiencing similar adjustment issues. This is especially evident in studies regarding Latino international students. One student from Venezuela studying in the U.S. stated, “I just knew this Columbian guy and two days after that I was making jokes; it was like I knew him for ten years [...] I didn’t find one single American guy with whom I feel that way” (Halic et al., 2009, p. 86). Similarly, in a study by Li et al. (2007), a Latina international student proclaimed, “The close knit Latino group serves another fundamental purpose: survival. Latino students rely on each other to learn the American system and be able to function in it” (p. 32). Other qualitative studies also illustrated how international students admitted that they would often communicate with their families in the home country both when they were feeling homesick and when they desired to speak their native language

(Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Li et al., 2007). Several pieces of literature also reported that for many international students, interacting with American students proved to be a daunting task at times; thus, driving students to maintain networks with the more familiar culture. One international student said, “Some [Americans] like to intimidate, and some like to treat me like an idiot alien that has just invaded their territory” (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992, p. 56). These quotes from international students who experienced difficulties in establishing friendships with Americans highlight why so many international students choose to form social support networks with compatriots (Halic et al., 2009) and rely upon their families for support and a sense of familiarity.

Social Support Network: Host Culture. As aforementioned, the majority of international students continue to maintain social support networks with members of their heritage culture, but many also form a support network with the host culture as well. One particularly constructive benefit of international education is that when students from various countries or cultures are able to and choose to interact, they promote international and intercultural understanding through the exchange of ideas (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2009). In the qualitative study by McLachlan and Justice (2009), 17 of the 20 international student participants interviewed were found to have established a friendship with American students, even though the process was slow and occasionally exasperating due to differences in language and, at times, culture. A successful support network with the host culture, however, can only be achieved if both the international student and the host student want to speak to one another; this interaction is a mutual process. Therefore, successful relationships between international and U.S. students depend upon regular and reciprocated contact in the normal course of the students’ lives (Shigaki & Smith, 1997). A recurring theme highlighted by various research discloses that having an American “buddy” and

developing an international peer buddy support network (Shigaki & Smith, 1997) are reported to have a positive and favorable impact on the adjustment and acculturation stress levels of international students. Establishing a social support network with an American student lessens the levels of acculturative stress that result from lack of English proficiency and cultural/social differences. A social support network with an American student is generated through interactions and communication with a native English speaker; therefore, social isolation becomes less of an issue and as international students interact with Americans, they are simultaneously listening to and speaking English while experiencing the dominant culture firsthand. "Interaction with U.S. students can not only improve international students' language and intercommunication skills, but also provide opportunities to understand and adjust to U.S. culture" (Zhai, 2002, pp. 14-15). The qualitative data obtained by McLachlan and Justice (2009) reveal that establishing friendships with American students is a wonderful opportunity to directly experience values and traditions of the host culture while making social and emotional connections. One international student from a study conducted by Tseng and Newton (2002) asserts the importance of building social networks with the host culture, "For study abroad life, the other important thing is to build more friendships. It is very important to find other international friends as well as American friends" (p. 591). However, not all international groups favor formulating social networks with Americans due to language or cultural barriers. For instance, studies have shown that Latino students tend to prefer to converse and spend more time with other Latinos during their stay in the U.S. (Halic et al., 2009; Li et al., 2007). In general, the majority of international students who manage to utilize the acculturation strategy of integration by maintaining social networks with the heritage group and forming social networks with the host group experience lower levels of acculturative stress. International students who reported frequent positive cross-cultural contact

with Americans through activities such as discussions and social events were less likely to experience loneliness, homesickness or identity confusion, and in general, had fewer negative reactions to experiences during their sojourn in the United States (Hull, 1978).

Social Identity Theory

Society is patterned into relatively distinct social groups, and people's views, opinions, ideas and practices are all acquired from groups to which they "feel" they belong (Hogg & Abrams, 1988); therefore, through interactions and the formulation of ties with various social groups, one can answer the questions, "Who am I?" and "To which social groups do I belong?" The social groups to which individuals belong (whether by assignment or by choice) will meaningfully impact one's life experience and how one behaves in different social contexts (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and the Social Identity Theory (SIT) seeks to grasp of deeper understanding of such phenomena. The basic idea supporting SIT is that a social category (for example, nationality) to which one perceives they belong to provides a definition of who one is and how one should behave in specific social contexts according to the defining characteristics of the category to which one belongs (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). British social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1972) introduced the idea of social identity and developed SIT to theorize how people conceptualize and form an idea of themselves in intergroup contexts and how a system of social categories "creates and defines an individuals' own place in society" (p. 293). Tajfel's empirical work on SIT occurred throughout the 1970s and 80s, and involved participants who were either British university students or school aged pupils between the ages of 15 and 18 and randomized sampling techniques were often utilized (Hogg, 1987). SIT falls into the realm of social psychology (Hogg & Abrams, 1988) because it emphasizes and studies human social behavior, more specifically group behavior, in an attempt to understand and

explain how the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of individuals are influenced in the actual or implied presence of others (Allport, 1968). The study of how groups and social categories impact and develop an individual's self-concept (a mental construct composed of the ideas one holds about oneself and the responses of others) (Hogg et al., 1995) revolves around the nature of the "social identity," which Tajfel (1972) defines as, "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (p. 292).

More recently, Hogg & Abrams (1988) and Abrams & Hogg (2004) (basing much of their own work off of the research previously conducted by Tajfel) have identified social identity as both a perspective and a theoretical approach. It is a perspective in that it is a particular way of approaching and studying the variables within social psychology and it is a theory in that it comprises a set of interrelated propositions and assumptions from which empirically testable hypotheses can be created (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). For instance, social identity theory rests on assumptions concerning the nature of people and society and that society comprises social categories, which stand in power and status to one another (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Therefore, SIT research has widely been concerned with intergroup behavior concerning how and why individuals join and move between social groups, how and why individuals acquire social identities, and how differing social groups may develop feelings of ethnocentrism or discrimination towards non-group members (Hogg, 2006; Hogg, 2012; Tajfel 1972; Tajfel, 1981). Hogg & Abrams (1988) have also expanded upon the definition of social identity as follows, "Belonging to a group is largely a psychological state which is quite different from that of being a unique and separate individual and that it confers social identity, or a shared/collective representation of who one is and how one should behave" (p. 3). Here again social identity is

linked to the realm of social psychology and describes how an individual utilizes a collective set of ideas and behaviors from the social groups to which he or she belong.

It should also be noted that social identity (or a collective representation of who one is and how one should behave in certain social contexts) is prescriptive, descriptive, and evaluative (Hogg et al., 1995). Group memberships and intergroup relations furnish a wide shared evaluation of and prescriptive ideas and attitudes towards a particular social category, and of its members, in relation to other connected and related social categories. For instance, within the international student context, if a student feels she is a member of the “Venezuelan student” category, her “Venezuelan student” group social identity (the collective thoughts, feelings and attitudes of the category) will affect how she views and behaves towards and among another related social category (i.e., “American student”) in various social contexts. Therefore, the membership to the “Venezuelan student” category prescribes and describes how a group member should feel about and behave towards non-group members. The social identities one obtains through group memberships also have self-evaluative consequences because groups and their members are motivated to adopt behavioral strategies for achieving and maintaining intergroup comparisons in favor of the ingroup (i.e., the group to which they belong) and thus, favor the *self* (Hogg et al., 1995).

Social Groups and Categorizations. Social groups vary widely in size, purpose, longevity, and cohesiveness (Hogg, 2012); and, such groups are imperative to the societal and psychological composition of an individual. According to Hogg (2006), a social group consists of more than two people who share the same social identity, they identify and evaluate themselves (and others in their group) in the same way and they share the same definition of who they are, what attributes they have, and how they relate to and differ from others who are not

members of their group. The social groups one belong to influence how others view and understand that individual, and at the same time, these groups also influence how individuals view themselves (Hogg, 2006; Hogg, 2012). Social groups “influence the type of people we are, the things we do, the attitudes and values we hold, and the way we perceive and react to people around us” (Hogg, 2012, p. 502). Most importantly, these groups furnish individuals with a sense of identity, or a way of locating oneself in relation to others (Hogg, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). McDougall (1921) spoke of group members developing a “group mind,” meaning that out of shared group behavior and interaction emerges a group mind that has a reality and existence which is independent from that of its individual members. Therefore, this “group mind” idea from the 1920s closely reflects the components highlighted by social identity, because it is with this collective “group mind” that individuals within groups classify, rank and regard other social groups and themselves as well. For this reason the subjects of social categorization and self-categorization are imperative to the study of SIT.

Social Categorizations. Social categorization is a process that allows human beings to cognitively accentuate similarities between stimuli in the same social category and differences between stimuli in different social categories (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This process also emphasizes various subjective beliefs that members in a social category/group share the same characteristics, which distinguish them from other groups, and as a result, social categorization can also produce perceptions, judgments and stereotypes of members of other groups. “People tend to classify others on the basis of their similarities and differences to self; they constantly perceive others as members of the same category to self (ingroup members) or as members of a different category to self (outgroup members)” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 21). This ingroup and outgroup member distinction is a driving force behind categorizations between groups within

SIT. In the case of this study, as international students from Venezuela acculturate to a new sociocultural environment, they are constantly experiencing the dominant culture through social interactions with Americans; thus, cross-cultural interactions allow these international students to classify which social categories they feel that they belong to as they learn about American values, norms, and behaviors in various social contexts. In other words, an international student may chose to join a new social category and formulate a new social identity depending on what a particular social context requires or deems as salient.

Essentially, social categorization transforms individuals into groups and accentuates similarities of self and ingroup and differences between self and outgroup (Hogg, 2006; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Social categories refer to the division of people on the basis of different social groups such as gender, nationality, religion, etc. These categories do not exist in isolation because a category is only such in direct contrast with another category, and any individual is at once a member of several different social categories (Hogg & Abrams, 1988) (i.e., a female, Catholic, Venezuelan student). An individual possesses a repertoire of various social identities due to their membership in various social categories; however, one may utilize a particular social identity depending on its salience to the social context at hand (Hogg, et al., 2006). In other words, one's social identity can become the more contextually salient basis of thought, perception, and behavior, depending upon the other social groups that are present. Situational cues or personal agenda (or both) cause people to "try out" different categories in order to make sense of the social field in ways that also evaluate *self* relatively favorably (Hogg, et al., 2006).

It should also be further explained that some social categories have more power or prestige than others (Hogg, 2006; Hogg, 2012; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Social categories (i.e., division of people) and their relationship with each other give society its distinctive social

structure, and this structure includes which groups hold more or less power in the social realm, i.e., the dominant and non-dominant groups. Since SIT is based on the assumption that some social groups hold more power over others, social categorization also examines how dominant groups can create and enforce (either materially or ideologically) a status quo (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). “The dominant group has the material power to promulgate its own version of the nature of society, the groups within it, and their relationships. That is, it imposes the dominant value system and ideology, which is carefully constructed to benefit itself and perpetuate the status quo” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 26).

Prototypes, Self-Categorization and Depersonalization. The process of categorizing someone as a group member transforms how one perceives him or her, and often peoples within the same ingroup measure each other in relation to the ingroup prototype. A prototype is a subjective, cognitive representation of the defining attributes (beliefs, attitudes, behaviors) of a particular social category (Hogg, 2006; Hogg, 2012; Hogg et al., 1995). “Prototypes are stored in the memory but are constructed, maintained, and modified by features of the immediate or more enduring social context” (Hogg, 2003, p. 469). Prototypes are viewed as cognitive sets that capture the context-dependent features of group membership, and they embody all attributes that individuals believe characterize groups and distinguish them from other groups, including beliefs, values, and behaviors (Hogg, 2003). The prototype is actively constructed from relevant social information and interactive contexts, and, since members of the same social category are exposed to and share the same information, perspectives, and attitudes, a collective social category shares its prototype as well (Hogg et al., 1995). “Prototypes capture the context-dependent features of group membership, often in the form of representations of exemplary members” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 260). Therefore, people can assess how close they or other

ingroup members are to a prototype, and those who are furthest from the prototype are referred to as “marginal members” (Hogg, 2006) of the social group. These marginal members do not display prototypical qualities or attributes, and may not be trusted by the ingroup or labeled as group deviants. These less prototypical or non-prototypical members of a group find it more difficult to influence the group (Hogg, 2012) and they may be pushed to the margins of the group. Marginal members are often disliked and treated as “black sheep” and/or are psychologically excluded or rejected from the group (Marquez & Páez, 1994). Similarly, an ingroup member of a particular culture may experience intragroup marginalization, which is the interpersonal distancing created by individuals from one’s non-dominant heritage culture group when one displays cultural characteristics reflective of the dominant culture (Castillo, 2009).

Social categorization of self, or self-categorization, cognitively assimilates the *self* into the ingroup prototype, and it is viewed as a transformation that is a fundamental process of group phenomena (Hogg, 2003). Self-categorization aligns self-perception, ideas and behaviors with the contextually salient social category and produces normative behaviors, shared norms, and a positive attitude towards the ingroup (Hogg, 2003). The salience of a particular social category depends on several factors. A particular social category becomes the psychologically salient basis for self-assessment, behavior choices, and social perception if it is important and valuable due to its easy accessibility from memory (this includes prior knowledge and experience) and if it is evident through perceptual signs presented through social interaction (speech, appearance, behavior) in a given social context or situation (Hogg, 2003). Through the process of self-categorization, one situates his/her *self* (their ideas, values, and behaviors) within the prototype of the salient ingroup in an attempt to exemplify the ideas, values and behaviors of the ingroup. As a result of self-categorization, or conforming to a social category and its social identity, an

individual is no longer represented as a unique person, but as an embodiment of the relevant ingroup prototype through the process of depersonalization (Hogg, 2003; 2006).

When one sees another ingroup member through the lens of the prototype, measuring the member against the prototype and assigning prototypical attributes to him or her, that ingroup member is perceptually depersonalized, or viewed as having the attributes of the group category verses attributes of an individual (Hogg 2012; 2006). Depersonalization means viewing oneself, or another person, as a category representative rather than a unique individual (Hogg, 2012). Social categorization depersonalizes ingroup and outgroup members, and the depersonalized perception of outgroups is generally referred to as *stereotyping* and using the “us” versus “them” terminology. One also utilizes self-categorization to depersonalize oneself in terms of ingroup prototype attributes, and in this way, self-categorization produces conformity and patterns of ingroup trust and solidarity (Hogg, 2012). Members of a particular social category also allow the idea of self-enhancement to guide the social categorization process so that the ingroup norms favor the ingroup, because research by Hogg (2006; 2012, et al., 1995) states that people have a basic need to see themselves in a positive light in relation to others.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory. Hogg (2003; 2006; 2012) states that one should not lose sight of the fact that; above all, social categorization imposes order on and ascribes meaning to a complicated social field. An individual’s place in society is a matter of utmost importance because of the individual’s desire to feel that sense of belonging and know the answer to the question, “Who am I?” Research has proposed that a key motivation for social identity processes is subjective uncertainty reduction (Hogg 2003; 2012). “People strive to reduce subjective uncertainty in their lives about their social world and their place in it-they like to know who they are and how to behave, and who others are and how they might behave” (Hogg, 2006, p. 120).

Social categorization assists an individual with this issue of insecurity because it reduces uncertainty by furnishing group prototypes that describe how people (including *self*) ought to behave and interact with others (Hogg, 2006). The more uncertain one is about their self-concept and place in the social realm, the more one strives to belong (particularly to groups that possess clear, prescriptive prototypes because they are prone to reducing uncertainty) (Hogg, 2003; Hogg, 2006; Hogg, 2012). Uncertainty can also depress self-esteem, and when people are self-conceptually uncertain, they are motivated by uncertainty reduction to identify with a social group (Hogg, 2006).

Intergroup Relations and Behavior. Tajfel & Turner (1986) have identified two extremes of social behavior, interpersonal and intergroup behavior. Interpersonal behavior refers to the interaction of two or more individuals that is fully determined by individual characteristics and not affected by social groups/categories. However, intergroup behavior, which is the main focus of SIT, consists of the interactions between individuals (or groups of individuals) that are fully determined by their respective memberships in various social categories/groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People often confirm their attitudes and perceptions through interpersonal *comparisons* with the attitudes and perceptions of others who are similar to themselves; therefore, this process of intergroup behavior creates collective assimilation among groups of people (Festinger, 1954). “Groups, and thus social identity, acquire meaning because ingroups are different from outgroups; logically it cannot be otherwise because it is differentiation that delineates categories” (Hogg, 2012, p. 506). As aforementioned, social identity is self evaluative, and its evaluation is derived from the properties of one’s ingroup relative to other groups, and this intergroup social comparison functions to accentuate the ingroup while highlighting the differences seen in outgroups (Hogg, 2012); thereby, causing constant comparisons between

social categories which can lead to discrimination between groups. Social groups also strive for positive distinctiveness, which is the intergroup relation containing features of ethnocentrism because each group desires to possess the “We are superior to them,” mindset (Hogg, 2006). A group that is striving for positive distinctiveness is driven by people’s motivation for self-enhancement and self-esteem (Hogg 2003; 2006). The implication of this idea is that low self-esteem motivates social identification and intergroup behavior because social identification and obtaining a social identity elevates self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; 2004).

Social Mobility and Subjective Belief Systems. As mentioned in the previous section, within a society there are known dominant (high status) and non-dominant (low status) groups. These powerful, high status groups enforce a status quo that simultaneously serves to benefit itself while leaving low status groups at a disadvantage. However, Tajfel and Turner (1986) speak of a subjective belief system consisting of two routes that an individual in a lower status or non-dominant group can choose to follow. “These beliefs, (which may not accurately reflect reality, as they are often ideological constructs) concert the stability and legitimacy of intergroup status relations, and the possibility of social mobility (psychologically passing from one group to another) or social change (psychologically changing the self-evaluative consequences of existing ingroup membership)” (Hogg, 2012, p. 507). The belief system of social mobility is based on the assumption that the society in which the individuals live is a flexible and permeable one, so that if an individual is not satisfied for any reason with the conditions imposed upon him or her by membership in a certain social category, it is possible for him or her (through talent, luck or hard work) to psychologically move into another group (Hogg, 2003; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This social mobility usually refers to individuals moving from a lower status to a higher status group. For instance, if a group member believes that his or her group’s lower status position in the

social realm is legitimate and stable, but that it is also possible to pass psychologically into the dominant group (i.e., acquire a social identity as a member of the higher status group), that member will be less likely to show solidarity to the ingroup, and instead, members of a low status group will attempt, as individuals, to disidentify with the ingroup and gain psychological entry into the high status group (Hogg, 2003; Hogg, 2012) by interacting with and taking on prototypical qualities of the higher status group. “A belief in social mobility simply leads subordinate group members to adopt individualistic strategies to attempt to cast aside their subordinate social identity with its potentially negative connotations and material inferiority in favor of the dominant group’s social identity and concomitant material advantage and positive evaluation” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 27). However, attaining social mobility is often difficult because one must be familiar with the social identity and prototype of the desired group. On the other hand, social change implies that the nature and structure of relations between social groups (i.e., lower and higher status) are characterized by marked stratification, making it impossible or difficult for individuals to divest themselves of an underprivileged or stigmatized group category/membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Hogg & Abrams (1988), social change “refers to a belief that the boundaries between groups are rigid, fixed and impermeable. They cannot be crossed” (p 28). Therefore, an individual in a lower status or unsatisfactory social group has two main options; they can either remain in their ingroup or attempt the difficult option of psychological social mobility.

Situating the Present Study within the Literature

The current study’s exploration of the social identities, as well as psychological and behavioral changes among Venezuelan international students in the U.S. through the acculturation framework is particularly relevant at present because globalization and an

increasing demand for an exceptional education have expanded the number of students pursuing higher education abroad (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). The United States remains the most sought-after host country for international students. The majority of these students journey to the U.S. from countries within Asia and the Middle East (Open Doors Report, 2011) and there is a plethora of literature and research covering the experiences of these international students; however, there is little research covering the growing population of international students from Latin American countries, particularly South America. These countries tend to be overlooked because they represent only 2.9% (Open Doors Report, 2011) of the overall international student population in the U.S. However, this case study intends to focus on students from the South American country of Venezuela for two main reasons: 1) to fill the gap in the literature on international students from Latin America 2) to explore the relationship between acculturation and social identity within the international student population. Although other research has conducted qualitative studies centered on international students in the U.S. and their acculturation processes (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Halic et al., 2009; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Tung, 2011), very few have directly researched the affect of acculturation on the social identity of international students, and this topic needs to be explored. The majority of the current literature addressing social identity and acculturation revolves around refugees (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003), that is why this case study intends to add to the literature by exploring, through in-depth personal interviews, how the process of acculturation impacts the social identities of international undergraduate Venezuelan students studying in the U.S.

Summary

This chapter has explored and presented the multiple layers of literature necessary to address how the process of acculturation affects the stress levels and social identities of

international students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S. university. Therefore, this chapter began by illustrating the current political context within the South American country of Venezuela, and how federal policy implementations are causing drastic shifts in the composition of the traditional social values and educational methods of the country, and are thereby pushing university students out of the country's borders. The following section elucidated upon the various levels of the acculturation framework and acculturative stress model in order to apply these theories to the international student population. Social identity theory and its numerous, yet imperative facets were also discussed so that these too could be studied by researching how the process of adjusting to a new sociocultural setting impacts the social identity decisions of international students in the U.S. A comprehensive literature review is necessary to establish the theoretical perspectives relative to a study; however, research methods play an integral role in situating a study into a methodological perspective by further explaining the research questions, goals, data collection, analysis and other steps essential to creating a holistic, valid research study. It is to the methodology section that this thesis now turns.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This section highlights how the facets of qualitative research design and the case study approach serve as the methodological foundation for exploring how the process of acculturation affects the stress levels and social identity formation and preservation of undergraduate international students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S. university. This chapter begins by providing an overview of the facets of qualitative research design before exploring, in detail, the elements that are needed for holistic case study design. The personal experiences and perspectives of the researcher are then examined to understand how these influence the overall goals of the study. Participant selection, ethical considerations, data collection and analysis processes will be reviewed to provide a deeper understanding of how the six participant cases were collected and investigated. Lastly, validity strategies and methodological limitations will be addressed to justify that the research questions of this study were examined within a comprehensive and legitimate empirical design.

Qualitative Research Design

According to Creswell (2007), qualitative design begins with the researcher's personal assumptions, ideas and worldviews, and expands to include poignant and relevant research problems that seek to understand how individuals or groups attribute meaning to social or human problems. Qualitative research is a design and a process that flows from philosophical assumptions through a theoretical lens, and then on to an approach to inquiry, such as case study research, that serves as the framework for investigating and analyzing human problems (Creswell, 2007). The researcher frames the study around qualitative assumptions and characteristics, which include the presentation of multiple perspectives or realities of the participant(s), which are grounded in an understanding of what those realities are in an attempt to

capture the views of the participants (Creswell, 2007). However, while the researcher's purpose is to present the experiences of the participant with the participant's own words and account, this must be done while simultaneously utilizing the "researcher as key instrument" for data collection and analysis mindset (Creswell, 2007), meaning that the researcher's personal ideas remain a part of the research process and must be monitored so as to not convolute the participants' voices. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the main objective of qualitative study is to create organized explanations of exactly which events led to which consequences and to develop a deep, fruitful understanding of the lived experiences, incidents and stories derived from study participants. Qualitative research essentially seeks to investigate and represent the meanings, phenomena, and peculiarities of human beings that are embedded within society from particular events to everyday life occurrences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This study falls under the broad umbrella of qualitative research design because it stems from an interest in investigating the lived experiences of international students in the U.S. in order to formulate a clear comprehension of how this population is affected by the acculturation process, stress, and social identity in a new sociocultural context. In addition, qualitative design focuses on individuals' personal stories and lived experiences while prompting researchers to develop a holistic, rich understanding of social topics to explicate how individuals in particular settings understand, account for, or manage daily phenomena (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and these factors make this research design both appropriate and logical for the purpose of this study.

Miles and Huberman (1994) note that qualitative data are a source of "rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable contexts" (p. 1), and this qualitative investigation used the case study approach in order to yield detailed, vivid data within a clearly defined context. Prior to further exploration of the various characteristics of qualitative research and case

study design, which form the foundation of this study, the overarching research questions will be re-visited to highlight the connection between the overall purpose of the current research study and the appropriateness of the participants chosen (Creswell, 2007). The main research questions are:

1. How does the process of acculturation affect the acculturative strategies, stress levels and social categories/identities of international students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S. university?
2. How do the social and psychological characteristics of an international student from Venezuela studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S. affect the acculturation strategy chosen and acculturative stress levels?
3. What social or cultural factors influence which social categories/identities are deemed as “salient” within a particular social context or life domain to an international student from Venezuela studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S?
4. What social or cultural factors act as barriers or enablers to social mobility and the formation of a dominant or desirable social identity for international students from Venezuela studying in the Midwestern U.S?

Case Study Research Design

I investigated the aforementioned research questions by utilizing the case study framework in order to construct meaning from the complex social/psychological theories of acculturation and social identity. A qualitative case study research design allowed me to gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of how the process of acculturation affects the stress levels and social identities of international students from Venezuela studying within the context of a university in the Midwestern United States. A qualitative case study is an incredibly suitable

research approach for the aforementioned social/psychological theories and the population of interest in this study because Hogg and Abrams (1988) contend that when investigating the social and psychological aspects of individuals, it is best to understand the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of those individuals by putting “emphasis upon the study of the individual as a unique and whole person” (p. 8). Within qualitative research, the case study framework recognizes individuals, or several individuals, as sites or cases within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). “The study of multiple individuals, each defined as a case and considered a collective case study, is acceptable practice” (Creswell, 2007, p. 122). In regards to the international student population, qualitative methods have been favored over checklists and questionnaires because such instruments do not adequately provide the researcher with an individual’s unique insight to the issues regarding the process of adjusting to a new sociocultural environment (Church, 1982).

The case study research approach is a comprehensive, descriptive, and exploratory type of design in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007) that yields rich, thick data. It includes one or multiple cases within a well defined, bounded context and requires in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information such as personal interviews, observations, and field notes (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative case study approach provided a holistic lens to examine the personal, individualistic lived experiences of six, Venezuelan international students in the Midwestern U.S., and more specifically, how the process of acculturation affected acculturative stress levels and the social identities of these individuals. Since case study research design was the particular qualitative approach utilized to investigate the aforementioned research questions of this study, it is appropriate to explicate the social issues, inquiries and theories of this study by situating them within the contextual conditions of case study research (Yin, 2003). The following

contextual conditions are imperative to gaining a complete, holistic comprehension of a particular case. Case study is “a type of design in qualitative research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73) which investigates and illuminates the following contextual conditions: the group, program, or individual (the case) that is affected by the event, incidence, program, or movement (the issue/occurrence of interest), which is initiated and propelled by a process or experience (the driving force behind the issue/occurrence of interest) (Creswell, 2007). These three essential contextual conditions, which are necessary to conduct valid and detailed case study research, are clearly reflected within this study. The six individual, international students from Venezuela studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S. represent the cases of the study. The various stresses, coping strategies, and social identities of the Venezuelan international students represent the main issues of interest in this study that are evoked by the process of acculturation, or the force influencing the issues of interest. In other words, it is the acculturation process that acts as the force, which creates the stresses associated with a new sociocultural environment and consequently generates the need for coping strategies and various social identities to be used by the international students in this study. It must also be noted that since each individual represents a distinct case, this study is defined as a collective or multiple case study, meaning that the issue or concern of interest is investigated by utilizing multiple cases (Creswell, 2007). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), “multiple cases offer the researcher an even deeper understanding of processes and outcomes of cases” (p. 26); thus, multiple case studies provide more holistic data by exploring the issues and results across a range of cases. As the previous examples illustrate, each of the aforementioned contextual conditions (the case, the issue of interest and the force causing the issue of interest) necessary for accurate, rich and compelling qualitative case study research, are included and examined within this study.

Case study research involves the study of an issue that is explored through one or more cases within a bounded system, or setting (Creswell, 2007). Miles and Huberman (1994) state that a case can be defined as a phenomenon occurring within a bounded context, and that the case in itself is the unit of analysis in the study. It is imperative to note that there is a specific focus or “heart” of a case study (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which in this particular study is represented by the individual cases of the international students from Venezuela and their responses to the acculturation process. Surrounding the “heart” of a study is the boundary or context (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which is represented by the selected university and the Midwestern U.S. in this study. Maxwell (2005) states that it is important to understand the unique contextual circumstances of qualitative research in order to investigate how a context influences the ways events, actions and meanings are shaped in a study. This bounded context or system is an extremely important piece to case study research because it includes the context or setting within which the main issues of the study are occurring. The bounded system of case study research is defined as being bounded by both time (months, years) and setting/context (where the main issue is situated) (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, the bounded system of this case study includes the time each international student has been studying in the U.S. (ranging from one to four years), and the broader setting, which includes the selected university and the Midwestern U.S. The bounded system of a case study is a significant aspect to the research because a case always occurs in a specified social and physical setting and one “cannot study individual cases devoid of their context” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27) because this context provides the necessary environment for the specific focus or issue to emerge. Therefore, the bounded contextual settings of this study must be further elucidated in order to provide an overview of the geographical locale and the institution of higher education,

because both settings served as the contexts within which acculturation took place during this multiple case study.

The Midwestern U.S. Context. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), the midwestern region of the nation includes the following 12 states: Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. The Midwest contains a total population of about 65,377,684 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), and is predominantly classified as a rural region due to its large agricultural industry, which is comprised of acres of farmland and food processing plants (Millard & Chapa, 2004). In fact, it is this industry that drives local economies in this region of the United States. Although the demographic make up of the Midwest has been primarily composed of Whites, interestingly, there has been an influx of Latino immigrants into this region over the past several years due to the food processing plants and factories springing up in rural areas (Millard & Chapa, 2004). According to a qualitative ethnographic study conducted in the Midwestern U.S. by Millard and Chapa (2004), the 1990s brought a large increase in the number of Latinos to rural areas in this region. Latinos are becoming a major part of rural America due to the restructuring of agriculture and food processing. In fact, a great deal of Midwestern communities would be experiencing a decrease in population size and a shocking scarcity of laborers to work in fields, factories, and other jobs that are often labeled as dangerous and demeaning were it not for these Latino migrants (Millard & Chapa, 2004). Therefore, the demographic composition of the Midwest is undergoing notable changes at present.

Growing diversity is also reflected within universities all across the region due to increasing numbers of international students. There are approximately 168,055 international students attending universities in this region of the U.S. (IIE, 2012), with the majority of these

students coming from China, India, and South Korea. According to the Institute of International Education's (2012) *Open Doors Report*, the Midwest had more states represented than the South, West, or Northeast in the list of the top 10 U.S. states hosting international students. Of the 12 states in the Midwest, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Ohio appear in the list of the top 10 host states, and in these four states the number of international students totals 103,255 (IIE, 2012). It is evident that the population of international students is on the rise in this region of the U.S. because all 12 states in the Midwest have experienced an increase of foreign students from the previous academic year, ranging from 1.5% to 15% (IIE, 2012). Although students from Asia and the Middle East compose the greater part of the international student population in the Midwest (IIE, 2012), the proportion of students from Mexico, Central America, and parts of South America (specifically Venezuela, Chile, and French Guiana) are on the rise (IIE, 2012) due to the economic and educational opportunities available in the Midwest. In order to take a more in-depth look at what valuable resources a university in the Midwestern U.S. can present to the international student population, the next section examines the particular university setting that serves as another layer of this bounded case study.

The University Setting: Site Selection. The institute of higher education utilized for this study was a public university located within one of the top 10 Midwestern host states for international students. It has a total of 14 colleges that range from the sciences to the humanities, and it offers interdisciplinary programs at the undergraduate, graduate and professional levels. This mission of the university is to improve humanity and serve as a diverse, student-centered metropolitan university. As of the 2010/2011 academic school year, the total student population was about 20,000. Demographically, the student body is composed primarily of Whites and African Americans, and many of the remaining students are Latino and Asian. For example,

during the fall of 2011, about 750 of nearly 18,000 undergraduate students were Latino and 380 were Asian. Of the total scholars attending this university, over 1,100, or 5.5%, are international students who have migrated various distances in order to obtain their degrees of higher education. The majority of this international student population includes students from Asia and the Middle East, and the remaining students have migrated from parts of Africa and Latin America. The university also includes multiple mandates and policies that encourage a multicultural campus community and a learning environment comprised of students, staff, and faculty of various nationalities, ethnicities, races, and religions. These policies include a university wide diversity policy, which prohibits the harassment of an individual based on race, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, or nationality. The university also recently established an office dedicated to diversity, equity, and community involvement, which works to enforce anti-discrimination policies campus-wide and to create a welcoming, educational environment for all persons.

In addition, the institution's strong dedication to diversity is highlighted by the 18 organizations incorporated within the International Student Association (ISA). The ISA's main purpose is to hold an orientation for incoming international students in order to assist them with their living arrangements, class schedule, and provide the opportunity for them to meet and interact with other students who may be from a similar part of the world. Most of ISA's organizations reach out to students from specific countries of origin. For instance, there are international groups of students from China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, India and Saudi Arabia. There are two organizations on campus dedicated to Latino students, including a Latino Student Union and a group for individuals from the countries of South America. This particular organization includes students from the countries of Venezuela, Chile, Colombia and Argentina.

There is also an office for Latino students, which is devoted to recruiting and providing a wide array of social and financial support for international students from Latin America. This university offers a variety of scholarships for international students that range in amounts rewarded, and international students are also permitted to obtain a part-time job on campus in order to pay for the cost of books, rent and other expenses.

Since this particular case study involved the examination of Venezuelan international students in the Midwestern U.S., I had to locate a university that contained this specific population of students for my data collection. I was also aware that this site needed to be accessible and a valid source of information (Creswell, 2007). The university chosen was ideal due to its multiple international student programs and its dedication to diversity. The Midwestern university utilized for this study was also selected because it possessed, as aforementioned, a South American student organization that contained several international students from Venezuela. Due to the practicality of the site and the accessibility it provided to the population of my study (Creswell, 2007), this university was ultimately selected as an appropriate data collection site. This section has outlined the demographic and economic aspects of the Midwestern U.S., how the university utilized in this study remains conscientious of its international student population by striving to promote diversity both in the classrooms and throughout the campus setting. This section also highlighted how the chosen university is an appropriate site for the study. In addition to the Midwest context and the university setting, it is also imperative to consider the perspective of the researcher engaged in this study.

Researcher Perspective

In a qualitative study, the researcher is seen as a key instrument because it is the researcher who collects data utilizing multiple sources and analyzes the data through inductive,

interpretive inquiry (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the researcher can never be fully removed from the data collection or analysis process, meaning that the goals, preconceptions, assumptions, and previous experiences of the researcher are involved in a qualitative study and must be examined in order to secure the validity of the study. I enter this case study as a 26-year-old American woman from the Midwest. I am not from Venezuela, nor am I a native Spanish speaker; however, I am personally familiar with the process of acculturation as a student because I journeyed outside of the U.S. to spend three months studying Spanish and cultural studies at a university in Costa Rica during the summer of 2011. Of the three courses I was involved in that summer, two were conducted in English and one was taught completely in Spanish. The course taught in Spanish caused me to experience severe stress because I did not possess a firm repertoire of necessary vocabulary words or a full understanding of how to conjugate verbs into various tenses. Certain social aspects of Costa Rican life were also different from my life in the U.S. For example, I had difficulties understanding natives when they spoke Spanish to me and I struggled to communicate with individuals in the host culture, which made it difficult to form social ties. I frequently interacted with the other American students attending the same summer study abroad program, and I spoke English with them on a regular basis. Although I did not possess a strong desire to participate in the Costa Rican culture, as the summer progressed I began spending more time with Costa Ricans around my town and I constantly observed how they behaved during certain social situations and interactions.

In summer 2012, I traveled to Costa Rica once more for a cross-cultural internship opportunity, this time with a strong foundation of the culture and a better understanding of the language due to my previous experiences there the summer before and various applicable pieces of literature I had read during my first year of graduate school. I lived in a small town and taught

English as a second language at a nearby technical college. I was instructed to teach my course completely in English. My colleagues in the English Department (all of whom were Costa Rican) chose to speak English to the students, each other, and to me. Therefore, I felt less stress as I adjusted to daily life in this setting because I had individuals who spoke my native language and Spanish was no longer a barrier. Since I was able to express myself freely and ask questions in my native tongue, I was able to acquire deeper and more meaningful understandings of Costa Rican culture, traditions and customs while I was teaching in that particular college setting.

I also spent ten days in the South American country of Venezuela during December of 2011 as a result of a mutual friendship with two international Venezuelan students whom I met through an event at a Midwestern university. I stayed in the homes of these students, which were located in the capital of the country, Caracas. While I was there, I witnessed firsthand the political hardships and frustration of the people. During my trip, I was able to observe and speak with younger and older generations of Venezuelans, and these interactions allowed me to understand how difficult and dangerous life can be when an entire country is severely divided into those who support the current president, Chávez, and his agenda, and those who do not. The rate of crime and homicides in Caracas, Venezuela is one of the highest in the world due to low levels of crime enforcement and increased corruption within various levels of the government and law enforcement. I often remained within the home of my hosts because they were too anxious to enter certain parts of the city with a white American woman due to the high rates of harassment, theft, and other crimes. These experiences abroad have created a deep interest in me related to the changes in Venezuela that push its citizens abroad and the phenomenon that is acculturation, especially how an individual adjusts to a new sociocultural environment, and these interests prompted me to study these topics on a deeper level in my academic life.

Along with my personal experiences of taking on the roles of student and teacher in Costa Rica and visiting Caracas, Venezuela, my scholarly interests have been influenced by the Venezuelan population and the process of acculturation. I earned my Bachelor's degree in English Education in 2009, and I am currently pursuing a MA degree in Cross-cultural and International Education (MACIE). Therefore, education and the academic experiences of students have always been significant to me as a scholar because my interests have centered on how students learn and what factors impede the learning process, and my Master's degree allows me to explore these questions through an international lens. Throughout the duration of my graduate program, I have been able to converse with colleagues and professors who share the dual enthusiasm for the exploration of education and culture and how the two impact the lives of students on a global scale. In my program, I have read literature; participated in academic discussion panels, and created research papers surrounding various aspects of global education (including student psychology, policy implementation, and the issues faced by international students). I have also explored the cultures of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and other world regions through my studies.

Through my personal experiences with travel and studying abroad and the courses and professional relationships within my graduate program I have been able explore the multiple facets of global education. My worldviews and past experiences have allowed me, as the principal investigator (PI), to develop a personal investment in and dedication to the topics of interest, which led to the construction of research questions regarding the issues of acculturative stress and the social adjustment of international students from Venezuela in the Midwestern U.S. These personal and academic experiences have merged to form the foundation upon which I discovered the issue of greatest concern to me, both as an educator and as a student, and this

issue revolves around the Latino population, international students and their acculturation to a new sociocultural environment. Thus, this case study seeks to explore and understand the personal lived experiences, social adjustment and acculturative processes of six individual students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S university.

Participant Selection

The ultimate purpose of case study research is to provide a holistic, detailed account of the case. In this study, the cases of interest are the lived experiences of six individual international students from Venezuela and their acculturation to life at an institution in the Midwestern U.S. In order for this study to truly delve into and investigate the main research questions posed, my participants, or cases, had to be members of the population of interest in this case study. Therefore, I utilized a sampling strategy commonly used in case study research called purposeful selection (Creswell, 2007). Purposeful selection allows the inquirer to select certain individuals to study because these individuals can purposefully provide a greater understanding of the issue or central phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) states that in qualitative research, purposeful sampling is employed because particular persons, settings, or activities must be selected deliberately in order to obtain detailed, in-depth information that cannot be discovered through other sampling methods. Since qualitative case studies serve to elucidate the particular and specific experiences and stories of the participants in order to “represent diverse cases and fully describe multiple perspectives in a case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 129), purposeful sampling provides the appropriate sampling strategy for this research. Furthermore, in a study that contains a limited number of cases, purposeful sampling is more applicable and reliable verses random sampling (Maxwell, 2005).

I am personally acquainted with an individual who is an international student from Venezuela studying the Midwestern institute chosen for this study, and this particular student had established social connections with several other Venezuelan students through both the South American student organization and the International Student Association at the university. Thus, my acquaintance became the gatekeeper for this study. Given that I had a pre-existing personal rapport with the gatekeeper, when the study was approved in May of 2012, I sent an email to this individual, which contained the overall purpose, goals, and procedures of the research study and the risks and benefits to the participants. I inquired if the gatekeeper would like to participate in the study and requested that the email be forwarded to other international Venezuelan students to give them the opportunity to be voluntary participants in the study. The potential participants were instructed to contact me directly via email with questions or to inform me of their interest in being a participant. During the beginning of the sampling process, which occurred during May 2012, two individuals contacted me expressing interest in the study. I then set up a time to meet with these individuals in person in order to establish rapport, glean a better understanding of their interests and motivations for wanting to participate in the study, and to gauge if these individuals would be able to provide a unique, honest perspective on the issues of interest (Maxwell, 2005).

I also asked these individuals if they could send my original email to any other Venezuelan international students, thereby utilizing what Miles and Huberman (1994) call the snowball sampling method. In snowball sampling, a researcher “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28) or cases that are relevant to the purpose and goals of the study. As a result of the snowball method, after a three-month duration, which spanned from May 2012 to August 2012, a total of six participants volunteered to be a part of the study. Through emails and personal conversations,

I ensured that each of these participants met the following two criteria for the study: 1) undergraduate international student from Venezuela studying at the specified university located in the Midwestern U.S., and 2) at least 18 years of age.

Although qualitative studies can range in sample size, typically case study research focuses on a limited number of cases or sites (Maxwell, 2005) so that holistic, rich data can be obtained for each separate case. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that the number of cases a multiple case study should contain depends upon the following question: How many cases are necessary to give the researcher confidence about analytic generalizations and yield rich data within and across cases? If a qualitative researcher attempts to analyze more than 10 cases, there is a larger risk that the data will be thin and devoid of details pertaining to the lived experiences of the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Typically the researcher chooses no more than four or five cases (Creswell, 2007), but less than 10 is still acceptable because a limited number of cases allow the researcher to explicate rich, thick data on an individualistic level for each case. Thus, six participants was an acceptable number for this study and will reflect the topics of interest, or the “heart” of the study, which is focused on the acculturative experiences and social identities of international students from Venezuela attending a midwestern university in the U.S. Table 1 highlights the demographic background of the study participants.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	First language	Years of English studied	Years in the U.S. as an int'l student	First time in U.S.?	Major
1	Ana	22	F	Latina	Spanish	15	1.5	No	Electrical Engineering
2	Leo	19	M	Latino	Spanish	14	2.5	No	International Business
3	Anita	18	F	Latina	Spanish	1	1	No	Marketing
4	David	22	M	Latino	Spanish	9	4	No	Chemical Engineering
5	Ivan	20	M	Latino	Spanish	14	3	No	Sales & Marketing
6	Nola	21	F	Latina	Spanish	18	3	No	Mechanical Engineering

Note: M=Male, F=Female

The table contains pseudonyms, age, gender, ethnicity, first language, total years of English studied, years in the U.S. as an international student, whether this was the student's first time in the U.S., and university major. All participants speak Spanish as a first language and identify as Latino/a. Furthermore, all participants stated that this experience as an international student was not their first time in the U.S., meaning that they have each visited the U.S. previously for various reasons and lengths of time, and this prior experience may have provided an opportunity for each participant to acquire some degree of social and human capital in the United States. However, the total years that the participants have studied English varies from one to 18 years, and this measure may play a role in affecting participants' confidence in establishing social rapport with members of the dominant culture. Another implication that may affect the outcome of the study is the length of time each participant has studied as an international student in the U.S., which ranges from one to four years. These varying durations of time spent in the U.S., along with the years of English studied, may affect each participant's acculturation experience, stress level, and social identity choices.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout all phases of the qualitative research process, the researcher must be aware of and sensitive to ethical considerations (Creswell, 2007). Such considerations are particularly important in case study research as the researcher negotiates entry to the field site, involves participants in the study, gathers personal data that reveal detailed lived experiences, and reports on the findings of the data (Creswell, 2007). Miles and Huberman (1994) describe the prevalent ethical issues that must be considered and addressed during each of the following three phases of the qualitative research process: recruitment, fieldwork, and reporting. During the recruitment phase when the researcher is communicating with participants for the first time, the researcher

must establish a trusting, professional rapport with the participants and inform them of the potential risks and benefits of the study (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher must also obtain informed consent from all participants during this stage to ensure that the consent to participate in the study is freely given and that participants are voluntarily agreeing to provide information about their personal lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Weak consent and mistrust between participants and researcher will result in poor data that is devoid of detail because respondents may feel the need to protect themselves (Miles & Huberman, 1994); therefore, rapport and informed consent is of utmost importance.

I addressed the issue of participant rapport in this study by conversing with all six participants individually to discuss any concerns or questions they had prior to the interviews. During these pre-interview discussions, I ensured that the setting chosen for the interviews was suitable and comfortable for each participant because all participants gave their approval of the interview setting. I also provided an outline of the interview questions for the participants to contemplate so they were aware that there was no secrecy or deception involved in the data collection procedures. Furthermore, all participants in this study were provided with a letter of informed consent, which illuminated the purpose, goals, and description of the study. In addition, the letter stated that participation was voluntary, that there were no risks, discomforts, or benefits associated with the study, and that participants may withdraw from the study at any time. Due to the honest and trusting rapport I developed with all participants and the clear participant expectations and rights set forth by the letter of informed consent, all six of the participants felt comfortable revealing their personal lived experiences to me. Thus, I was able to obtain richer data and no participants chose to end an interview or withdraw from the study.

During the fieldwork phase of the qualitative research process a researcher must ensure that no risk or harm befalls a participant and that an open and respectful flow of communication is established with participants (Huberman & Miles, 1994). When working with participants in the field, a researcher needs to respect them as individuals by avoiding stereotypes and discriminatory language and by constantly practicing cultural sensitivity (Creswell, 2007). Participants must also be protected from various degrees of emotional and psychological harm, such as injured self-esteem or threats to one's reputation or position (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As I conducted interviews with each participant, I made certain to treat each individual in a respectful and professional manner and invited them to share any concerns they had before beginning the interview. All participants consented to have their interview digitally recorded and the digital tape recorder was in full view for the duration of all interviews. Participants were free to pause or stop the recording process at any time. The risk of harm to the participants in this study was quite low because the question topics in the interview protocol were neither deeply personal nor emotionally probing. I also informed participants that the information obtained during the interviews, along with the names or subject identifiers for all participants, organizations, or institutions will remain confidential and that pseudonyms would be utilized.

During the reporting phase of a qualitative study, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are three tools that must be utilized to protect participants (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Details about a participant's lived experiences must be kept private, meaning that there must be ethical boundaries regarding who can view data retrieved from a study. Data reported must also be confidential so that certain details cannot be easily traced to a particular site, case, or respondent. Anonymity of individuals and institutions is also imperative in a study with a small number of cases so that all parties involved in a study feel their identities are protected, and

if participants feel that their information and identities are secure they are often more willing to share richer details about their experiences. Participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher and neither the name nor the distinctive location of the public university utilized was provided. The digital audio recorder and the additional data collected from interviews, including field notes, contact summary sheets and a researcher diary are located in a locked filing cabinet in a secure location. No one other than myself has access to the data obtained. All digital audio recordings are saved in a password protected computer along with typed transcripts, graphs, tables, and other files containing private information that have been stored as Microsoft Word documents. These audio recordings and files will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Data Collection

The data collection process began during the fall of 2012 and data analysis was complete in the spring of 2013. “Case study data collection involves a wide array of procedures as the researcher builds an in-depth picture of the case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 132); therefore, it is necessary for multiple sources of data to be utilized during case study research. Qualitative data was collected in this study through the use of personal, semi-structured interviews, field notes, contact summary sheets, and a researcher’s diary. The in-depth, personal interviews were the main source of data for this study because interviews have the ability to provide more accurate details and additional information that may be missed in observation or other forms of data collection (Maxwell, 2005).

After all six participants voluntarily consented to become a part of the study, they each individually participated in one semi-structured, face-to-face interview with me in an open studio setting. The interviews were conducted in a public library, and all participants expressed that this

site was appropriate for conducting the interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder with the permission of the participants. For the duration of each interview, the digital audio recorder remained in view on the table between the researcher and participant. Prior to the start of each interview, the participants were asked to fill out a confidential demographic survey that included questions regarding: age, gender, ethnicity, first language, years of English studied, number of years spent living in the U.S. as international students, whether this was their first time in the U.S., and their major. The interview protocol consisted of a series of open-ended questions based on the data collected from the literature review. These interview questions were grouped into the following five categories: 1) demographics/general information, 2) life prior to the U.S., 3) life as an international student in the U.S., 4) acculturation; and 5) identity. All questions contained in the interview protocol (see Appendix A) were appropriate for the scope and purpose of this study, and other questions were added during some of the interviews because additional, relevant topics of interest arose. For example, several participants brought up the issue that they currently have an accent when they speak English even though they tried to reduce this accent in the past, which prompted me to ask these participants if they had ever taken private English language courses outside of the school setting. Also, during each interview I kept observational field notes to record interesting topics or ideas and to elaborate upon the body language that participants displayed during the interview process because non-verbal communication can reveal additional information regarding an individual's feelings towards an issue. All interviews were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word documents within three weeks following the last interview.

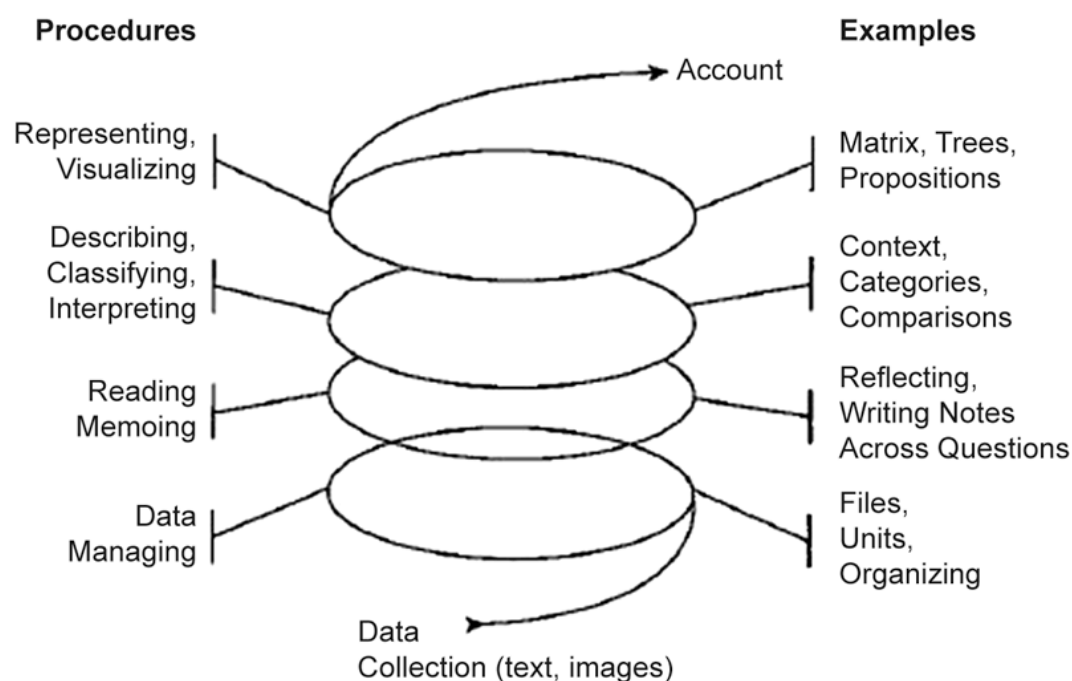
In addition to the field notes, I also utilized contact summary sheets and a research diary, all of which fall into the category that Creswell (2007) refers to as qualitative documentation.

After conducting each interview, I created a contact summary sheet (see Appendix B) for each participant in order to reflect upon the main concepts, issues, and questions that arose during the contact (Miles & Huberman, 1994). “A contact summary is a single sheet with some focusing or summarizing questions about a particular field contact” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 51), and typically these questions ask the researcher to ponder any new, salient or illuminating information or questions that were revealed in each contact. For instance, after my first three interviews, I realized that the participants were either showing pride for their home country or they were not, and I made a note to keep this idea in mind as I conducted the last three interviews to see if patterns would emerge in the data. Finally, in the days and weeks following each interview, I recorded thoughts and questions related to the study in a researcher’s diary. For example, if a participant made contradictory statements about their acculturation experience, I would make a note of it in my diary and label it for future reference. Also, if I discovered a piece of literature or a transcription note that sparked innovative ideas, I was able to record them and make connections between them in the diary. This diary also allowed me to think critically about the study and to ponder the gaps in the data that needed to be re-visited. Both the researcher diary and the contact summary sheets aided me in creating preliminary codes prior to the main data analysis process.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2007), case study analysis consists of organizing, describing and reducing the data into themes and final conclusions that extend within and among cases. In order to analyze the six cases present in this study, I utilized a combination of Creswell’s (2007) data analysis spiral (Figure 3) and Miles and Huberman’s (1994) systematic approach. These particular approaches to data analysis fit extremely well with my case study research because the

transcriptions from the interviews yielded extremely thick data that consisted of lengthy verbal responses that needed to be interpreted in detail. The data also allowed me to create detailed field notes and reaction notes in my researcher's diary following the interview. Such thick data requires analytical processes that contain detailed steps in order to analyze all elements of the data, and the four phase data analysis spiral as outlined by Creswell (2007) and the systematic approach by Huberman and Miles (1994) are such processes; therefore they are appropriate for explicating the topics of this case study.



Source: Creswell (2007)

Figure 3: Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral (Source: Creswell, 2007, p. 493).

Following Creswell's (2007) data analysis spiral, I first organized the data from my multiple sources into manageable forms by transcribing all interviews in Microsoft Word document files. I also typed all field notes and contact summary sheets and saved them as Word documents as well. The second phase of this data analysis process was reading the documents

and creating memos in the margins in order to glean a sense of the entire database (Creswell, 2007). I read each individual transcript in its entirety, then wrote a brief summary of the main points the participant shared, in other words, a sweeping statement of each overall transcript (Creswell, 2007). After summarizing, I re-read each transcript, this time writing informal notes and memos in the margins. These memos included key words and phrases that related to the main topics of the study; acculturation and social identity. Then, I re-read my field notes and researcher diary entries and inserted notes/memos when applicable. To complete the second phase of the data analysis spiral, I created broad categories by reviewing the notes and memos written within the transcripts and other documents before moving onto to the third phase of the data analysis spiral, which includes describing, classifying and interpreting.

During the third phase of the analysis spiral, Creswell (2007) stresses that a researcher must provide a detailed description of the initial categories as they emerge from the data in order to then classify and interpret these categories. At this point, the researcher is simply expanding upon the summary from the previous step by describing, in more detail, the thoughts and words of the participant, without adding any theory. Codes, or categories, are also assigned at this stage in the process, and a researcher must generate a preferably short list of codes based off of the notes and memos of the previous step (Creswell, 2007). My coding process will be described in detail below. It was during this third stage of Creswell's (2007) analysis spiral that I integrated Miles and Huberman's (1994) systematic approach to analysis to help me summarize transcripts and reveal relationships among participants. Miles and Huberman (1994) provide "detailed steps in the process, such as writing marginal notes, drafting summaries of field notes, and noting relationships among categories" (Creswell, 2007, p. 148).

According to Miles and Huberman's (1994) systematic approach, in order to retrieve accurate codes and themes, during the coding process a researcher must ask "summarizing questions about a particular field contact. The field-worker reviews the written-up field notes and answers each question briefly to develop an overall summary of the main points in the contact" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 51). Therefore, both the approaches of Creswell and Miles and Huberman include the creation of a general summary statement for data analysis. Since I had created summary statements using the data analysis spiral, I utilized those statements to guide my thoughts regarding the following questions as posed by Miles and Huberman (1994): What were the major key words/themes that were striking during this contact? Did the participants describe any ideas that conflicted during the course of the interviews? In accordance with the systematic approach, I re-read the marginal notes in all documents and made note of key words that were reflective of the overall research questions related to acculturation and social identity. These marginal notes were incredibly helpful and made the procedure of identifying key codes and constructing themes an easier process. Lastly, I read through the key words highlighted in the transcript margins, the field notes, contact summary sheets, and researcher diary and formulated relationships between the four data sources, as suggested by Huberman and Miles (1994). It should be noted that I utilized Strauss' (1987) method of coding as cited in Huberman and Miles (1994) because I did not create a start list of codes, rather I collected the data, read the transcripts twice, reviewed them line by line and highlighted particular words and phrases that were reflective of important topics so that "categories or labels are generated, and a list of them grows" (Huberman and Miles, 1994, p. 58). I color-coded my various codes related to topics associated with acculturation and social identity. For example, stressors (such as, "schoolwork, English") were highlighted in pink, coping strategies (such as, "talking with friends") were

highlighted in blue, and preferred social groups (such as “international, American, Venezuelan students”) were highlighted in yellow. As a result of color-coding, I generated a strong list of codes so I was able to continue on to the subsequent part of the third phase of Creswell’s (2007) data analysis spiral, namely data classification. During data classification, I combined and condensed the codes into seven main themes related to the acculturation process, coping strategies utilized, and social identities chosen as salient in certain social contexts. For example, I considered the blue codes (across cases) associated with stress which primarily reflected ideas such as, “English language, sounding foreign,” and condensed them into a solid theme stating that these international students from Venezuela experienced stress due to difficulties with the English language. It should also be noted that I generated themes when a certain phrase or idea was repeated several times across cases, because such repetition allowed me to identify the relevance of that idea or phrase.

To conclude the third phase of Creswell’s (2007) data analysis spiral, which includes interpretation of the data, I examined the stories presented by the participants and analyzed them in order to find any dichotomies or metaphors present in the data. Finally, I interpreted the themes and was able to make sense of the data by reviewing the “lessons learned” (Creswell, 2007, p. 153) from the analysis process. The fourth and final stage of the data analysis spiral serves to express and represent the lived experiences of participants in their most pure and holistic form. A researcher may choose to represent the data as a graph, diagram, or a table; however, the mode of data representation utilized must be appropriate to display the themes and sub-themes discovered from the data (Creswell, 2007). Since this is a multiple case study, I chose to represent the data in narrative form to describe, using the words of the participants, the themes within and across cases. Creswell (2007) suggests that if more than one case is used in a

study a researcher should engage in within-case and cross-case analysis. Within-case analysis occurs when a researcher examines the themes within a singular case, whereas in cross-cases analysis a researcher examines themes spanning across cases to explore the shared themes in a study (Creswell, 2007). “In the study of multiple cases, the researcher may compare the within-case themes across multiple cases in cross-case analysis” (Creswell, 2007, p. 246).

By combining the two aforementioned strategies of qualitative data analysis, I was able to formulate relationships between the key ideas and themes of the study. The conclusions that emerged illustrated how a particular Venezuelan student “feels” (relating to high or low stress) when he or she interacts with Americans in the U.S., how he or she “feels” (relating to high or low stress) when interacting with other international students or Venezuelans in the U.S., the reasons behind such feelings, which social groups were more favorable to certain participants in particular contexts, and how the participants coped with the various stresses of acculturation.

Validity and Credibility

The concept of validity is extremely relevant and significant in qualitative research. According to Maxwell (2005), validity is a “straightforward, commonsense way to refer to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation or other sort of account” (p. 106). Maxwell (2005) also describes two main threats to validity, researcher “bias” and reactivity, and these must be addressed in order to avoid illogical and invalid research conclusions. Researcher “bias” refers to the subjectivity of the researcher, or the researcher’s preconceptions, theories and views pertaining to the topics of interest, setting and population of a qualitative study (Maxwell, 2005). This researcher “bias” cannot be eliminated by removing the values, theories, and beliefs of the principal investigator because the researcher is an instrument in the study and will inevitably hold some degree of influence over the data collection and

analysis (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). In qualitative research, particularly when the data collection strategy of conducting interviews is utilized, the researcher is “part of the world he or she studies” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109) and cannot be separated from it. The second validity threat, known as reactivity, refers to the influence that the researcher has on the setting or individuals studied. The influence of a researcher should be recognized and considered within a qualitative study because this type of research does not attempt to eradicate researcher influence, but understand it and use it in a proactive manner (Maxwell, 2005). In order to address and counter the aforementioned threats in this study, I have implemented three strategies that can combat potential threats to validity including: rich, thick data, member checks, and triangulation (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

Rich, thick data description through extensive interviews and precise transcripts enable a researcher to collect data that are detailed and varied to provide a revealing picture of the participants or setting under investigation (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). Since I transcribed all six interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word documents and produced detailed ideas through writing descriptive memos in my field notes, researcher’s diary and contact summary sheets, I was able to accurately capture rich, specific, and concrete information regarding the lived experiences of my participants (Maxwell, 2005). Member checking, also referred to as respondent validation (Maxwell, 2005), is a critical technique in qualitative study that involves taking data, analysis, and conclusions back to the participants so they may judge the accuracy and credibility of the account (Creswell, 2007). I emailed all participants a copy of the quotes from their transcript that I planned to use in this study to give them the opportunity to provide feedback on the accuracy of their own words. Maxwell (2005) states that member checking is a key method of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meanings of the views and beliefs

of participants. This process also allowed me to review my own level of potential bias and to ensure that I was capturing the words of the participants versus my interpretation of what participants were saying (Maxwell, 2005). As aforementioned, case study research relies upon multiple sources of data in order to provide a holistic and valid image of the issues represented in each case; therefore, triangulation, or collecting information from a diverse range of sources, methods, theories, and individuals (Creswell, 2007) reduces the risks of systematic bias and allows a purer assessment of the data (Maxwell, 2005). For this reason I utilized six different participants (each representing a case) so that they could share their unique ideas and experiences concerning the issues of the study. I also used four distinctive sources of data including individual interviews, field notes, contact summary sheets, and a researcher diary. Using triangulation and comparing and contrasting the data obtained through these multiple sources reduced the risk of error and researcher bias.

In addition to the previously mentioned validity strategies, I also conducted a pilot study during the spring of 2012 related to the topic of the acculturation of international students from Venezuela studying at a Midwestern U.S. university. Maxwell (2005) defines a pilot study as a small-scale, exploratory study designed to focus on the issues and theories of interest and for researchers to specifically test their ideas and methods and investigate their implications. My pilot study was conducted from January to May of 2012. The purpose of this study was to explore how Venezuelan international students studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S. utilize various acculturation strategies to deal with the sociocultural stresses associated with the process of acculturation. This pilot study was a small-scale case study that consisted of two participants (cases) within the context of a Midwestern U.S. university. Informed consent was obtained and personal interviews were conducted with both participants. Utilizing interview

transcriptions, personal field notes, and member checking, I analyzed the data to discover that students with higher social and human capital tended to utilize the integration strategy of acculturation to cope with stress; therefore, the pilot study provided me with an understanding of how the participants assign meaning to social issues and personal experiences regarding the topics of interest and how these personal meanings inform participants' actions (Maxwell, 2005). More importantly however, this study illuminated a topic of further interest. The results of the pilot study helped me identify another factor that played a role in this acculturation process. I noticed through my analysis that international students spent more time with certain social groups in various social contexts, and after further literature review I was able to discover that this missing piece to my study was social identity. This pilot study ignited a personal interest in the role that social identity may play in the acculturation process of international students and ultimately inspired this current study, which seeks to investigate the aforementioned topics of acculturative stress and social identity collectively.

Methodological Limitations

Qualitative research, given its interpretive nature due to the researcher being the primary instrument, often contains methodological limitations. Such limitations must not be ignored, but brought into the light and addressed by the researcher so that they do not impede the study's validity (Maxwell, 2005). One limitation of this study is the selection problem of key informant bias, which occurs when qualitative researchers rely upon a small number of informants (Maxwell, 2005); thus, there is no guarantee that the informants' views are typical or reflective of the voices and ideas of the entire participant population. Since I only interviewed six participants for this case study, I must accept that this small sample size does not reveal the

ideas, opinions, or experiences of all international students from Venezuela studying in the Midwestern U.S. context.

Another limitation of this research is the personal rapport I have with a participant in this study. Due to the fact that my relationship with this participant is both personal and professional, the data obtained from that particular interview may be skewed and not adequately reflect this participant's ideas or lived experiences for several reasons. First, the participant may censor his/her honest opinions so as not to offend me, or the participant may also choose not to disclose certain stressful lived experiences involving negative social encounters in the United States if the participant believes I may react adversely as an American. Therefore, this personal relationship may prevent the study from yielding some pieces of thick, rich data if certain details are left unsaid. Also, during the interview with this participant, I felt comfortable and at ease which prompted me to make oral commentary in order to express my own thoughts. By doing this, I may have convoluted the participant's ideas with my own and inserted researcher bias into the data. However, because I am aware of these limitations, they will be sought out and addressed by utilizing various sources of data to avoid key informant bias and by separating my own thoughts and ideas from the participants' in all interview transcriptions to ensure a more holistic qualitative case study with rich, detailed data.

Summary

This section provided a detailed overview of the various facets of qualitative methodology utilized in the study. The opening segment illustrated the purpose of and procedures involved in conducting a multiple case study and how such a study provides rich, thick data pertaining to the lived experiences of individuals. The cases, bounded system and site selection of this study were also identified and expanded upon in detail. I also described how my

personal and academic experiences, or researcher perspective, influenced various aspects of this study. Participant selection was addressed in order to explain certain sampling methods (purposeful and snowball) and provide justification for the site and participants chosen. The ethical considerations of respect, confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were reviewed before delving into the data collection and data analysis processes that were used in this case study. These processes illuminated the sources of the data and how this data was examined within and across cases to form codes, themes and to draw conclusions. Finally, the topics of validity and credibility were reviewed in order to illustrate how despite the inevitable methodological limitations present in all qualitative data, it is possible create a valid and credible case study by utilizing multiple sources of data, triangulation, member checking and conducting a pilot study. Overall, this section provides the methodological foundation of the current study and serves to explain how the following findings were obtained.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter presents a comprehensive, in-depth description of the acculturation experiences of six international students from Venezuela studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S. and how these experiences impact social identity and levels of acculturative stress. The main objective of this chapter is reflective of qualitative case study design because it seeks to highlight the individual lived experiences of the participants and explicate the themes, or lessons learned, that appear throughout several cases. This chapter begins by presenting the data found within-cases by providing a detailed, individual profile of each case. In this within-case section, the following data will be illuminated to provide a holistic account of each participant's lived experience: personal characteristics, struggles within the host society, coping mechanisms utilized, and future aspirations. Following the within-case data presentation, cross-case findings will be expanded upon to illustrate the common themes shared among some or all cases in this study. Both the unique within-case experiences and the cross-case findings will be provided through the presentation of direct quotes collected from face-to-face interviews, because the voices of the participants truly exemplify the lived experiences that form the heart of this study.

Within-Case Findings: Individual Participant Experiences

In order to create a holistic and accurate description of the unique acculturation experiences and social identity choices of the six participants in this study, it is imperative to explicate upon the findings located within each individual case. Multiple case study research seeks to first comprehend the lived experiences within each case, so that themes may become evident across various cases. In this study, each participant was an international student from Venezuela studying at a university in the Midwestern U.S.; however, the demographic and psychological traits differ among these students, as do levels of acculturative stress, coping

strategies used and social categories/identities employed. Therefore, this section aims to create an honest and credible portrayal of each participant's acculturation process in a new sociocultural setting. The following students will be presented in the order in which they were interviewed.

Ana. Ana is 22-years-old and has been studying electrical engineering in the U.S. for one and a half years. Ana's sincere and determined nature is reflected in the firsthand account of her study abroad experience. She identifies as Latina and although her first language is Spanish, she has studied English for the past 15 years of her life. In fact, gleaning a deeper understanding of the English language with the hope of becoming bilingual is one main reason Ana gave as to why she was drawn to study in the U.S:

I really wanted to, to speak English. That's why I came, you know? I could have gone to, I dunno, Argentina or Spain or somewhere else, but I decided to come to the U.S. Like to, you know, I have to speak in another language, so I was really prepared for that.

Ana also had one previous experience within the U.S. in 2000 when she was vacationing with her family. Although she was just 10 years old, she recalled how safe and secure she felt on that trip and how those feelings pulled her to study in the U.S. as an adult. She recounted her first impression of the United States as a girl:

I've only been here before one time. Um, but I was really impressed with, like, the sense of trust people get, not even knowing you. Like, there's this trust, this trust thing. For example, if you enter into a store and you don't have the security things at the door, you know? You cannot do that in Venezuela, everything has the security things. We don't have that sense of security back in Venezuela. So that kind of impressed me, like the first

time I was here. So I got already in mind, like I was gonna be secure here. I was gonna be safe! Like, that was one of the top things I wanted, that I was looking for.

Ana's case is unique because she began her undergraduate degree in Venezuela, but left her public university after about a year. Besides the fact that Ana considered the U.S. to be a safer environment than her home country, she also explained that a main incident that pushed her to finish her education abroad was when the Venezuelan federal government cut funding and resources at her university. It is important to note that at the time Ana was a freshman attending university, Mission Sucre was in effect and reduced the quality of universities throughout the country in order to increase the overall quantity of students.

I was studying, um; I was doing my undergrad back in Venezuela. And then, you know with the Venezuelan government things started to get real messy and they uh, reduced the budget for my university by 30 percent. So, they started to get like- problems with transportation and everything. So, and with professors, they, they were strike... striking. It was pretty terrible. So I talked to my parents. We talked about coming, like me coming to the U.S. to finish it [university degree]. Just like, have a safe way of knowing that I was actually going to finish my degree. So yeah, we talked about it and we did all the paperwork. And I really liked the engineering program. So yes, I decided to come here.

During her experience as an international student thus far, Ana has maintained her relationship with family and friends in Venezuela, while seeking new social relationships within the university setting in the Midwest. A strong relationship with her family in Venezuela is important to Ana, and she stated that their relationship is stronger now that she is abroad.

Now it's different of course. Now we're thousand miles away, so I tell her [mother] everything. It [communication] has improved. It was good back there when I was living in Venezuela, but it has grown stronger here.

As aforementioned, Ana maintained bonds with former friends from Venezuela as well. "I still have friends from my university there that are really, really good friends. And yeah, like communication wise it is good." However, forming social networks with Americans in her new environment was a top priority for Ana because it allowed her to gain a firmer grasp of the new language and culture.

I kind of wanted to meet different people, because now I'm the treasurer of ISA, which is the International Student Association. That helped me to- to meet a lot of people, international students, but as well as Americans. Like, you know some of them [Americans] are really interested in our cultures and everything. It's good for us [Venezuelans] to spread our knowledge about, like our culture, so other people can match, or see some things are similar and even notice the differences. I mean I have more American friends now, and I really like having them. When I try to speak in a different language [English], they [Americans] help me as much as they can. So, if for example I don't know this word, they try to tell me. It's good.

Ana also formed a social network with other Venezuelan co-nationals and South American international students within the Midwestern U.S. university. This group has become like a family away from home in this new sociocultural context, and she claimed that they support one another because they can relate to the shared experience of studying in a new country.

When I came here there were other Venezuelans, and we as fellow Venezuelans know how bad it is to come to another country and live on your own. So, I had these guys and they helped me a lot, like a lot, trying to make me feel comfortable. Oh, I love 'em. It's like, we have grown to a big family, you know? Like, as Venezuelans, because we are kind of a group, as a culture, we try to help each other as much as we can. And now it's not only with other Venezuelans, it's like South Americans in general. We have um, four Columbians and two Chileans. We try to (pause) it's like a getaway from everything where we are living. Sometimes its like, you can't express what you feel to other people, but to the people you talk to in your same language. It's liberating to do that.

Ana's social relationships combine to provide social supports from both home and host countries. Furthermore, she believes that even though she has to learn new culturally acceptable values and interpersonal behaviors of the host society, she has maintained the normative values and behaviors of her home country, and utilizes them particularly when she is among co-nationals.

We [Venezuelans] need that, you know, that warm that we used to have back in Venezuela. Cause it's different now, it's not that you don't have it [affection] here; it's a different kind of treatment. For example, the way we are when we meet a person, we hug them, we kiss on the cheek and we're used to that. Now we don't have that. So we are used to that and we don't want to lose that. You have to be careful with it [behavior]. When you are used to something and you get another [way to behave], it's just kind of shocking.

Regarding both the cultures of Venezuela and the U.S., Ana explained that a main difference between the two is the fact that Americans value the individual and Venezuelans favor

collectivism, but she accepted both practices and did not negate one or the other. “You’re [Americans] kind of more individualist. We tend to do things in a group. We uh, probably feel more close, like familiar? Nucleo or (pause). Nuclear. I don’t think they’re bad things, they’re just different things between our cultures.” Once again, Ana demonstrates that she currently accepts the values and cultural practices of both groups and has formed social networks with both host nationals and other Venezuelans in the United States; however, this was not always the case. When she initially came to the U.S., she suffered stress from both the difference in language and the fact that she was not from the host country, and therefore, an outsider.

Uh, the thing comes when like, you have to talk and everything, you know? It’s like, you [Americans] detect the accent, and it’s like, ‘Where are you from?’ So we [Venezuelans] have this, like prejudice or something, like they’re [Americans] gonna treat us different if they know that we aren’t from here. So, you know, you are kind of skeptical or something, being around other people, at least Americans. I had this fear inside. I dunno, not being able to communicate as well. I feel kind of afraid sometimes because it is (pause) difficult to address, um, to people like, make complete sentences with um, and actually make sense. But now it’s better.

Her year and a half in the host country has allowed Ana to form the aforementioned social networks with various groups, and it is these groups that allowed her to cope with the stresses she encountered during her first few months as an international student. Ana became involved in several campus organizations, which allowed her to form new social bonds.

“Because now I’m the treasurer of ISA, which is the International Student Association. That helped me to, to meet a lot of people, international students, but as well as Americans.”

Besides being the treasurer of ISA, she also plays soccer with her American co-workers and these relationships aided her in multiple ways since coming to the U.S.

I've grown more confident and secure in myself. That's helped me a lot. Now I'm willing to actually communicate with people that I like, never thought of doing. I've done a lot of things I've never thought of doing. Well, I started playing soccer with my um, [American] co-workers. So it was different, you know? I told myself, why not? You should try it. What's the worst that could happen? And I loved it! (Laughs) So yeah, I went every Thursday to play with them and it was awesome. I'm with Americans all the time during my work.

Ana hopes to spend a greater amount of time with Americans outside of work in the future so that her English skills continue to improve. "Hopefully I'll spend more time with Americans, because you know, it's gonna help me improve my English and everything, and the way I communicate with them." She also desires to maintain her current scholarship by achieving excellent grades in an effort to help her parents who are paying for some of her schooling. She is uncertain of her long-term goals after she graduates from college, but her options include remaining in the U.S. or returning to Venezuela so that she can improve the lives of others there who suffer due to political insecurity. "I'm still not sure, uh, what I'm gonna do after I graduate. Well, if I get a job offer I'm gonna stay here for awhile. (Pause) I'm probably gonna stay here for awhile and then go back, and re-build my country."

Regarding the aforementioned political insecurity in Venezuela, Ana believes that President Chávez and the hatred between the political parties are at fault for the current insecurity and ill feelings she saw occurring within the Venezuelan population:

Before Chávez went into like, the government and everything, we didn't have that sense of hate. And now, well it has (quietly) changed a little bit. Um, because we have these two things, like the government, the ones that are a party for the government, you know, and the ones that are against it. And the President is like, telling the people that are with him, 'You know they [other political party] are bad,' and everything. And he's separating families and everything because of that. People say, 'You are for Chávez , don't talk to me,' or 'You are against Chávez , don't talk to me,' and it's like, really? Like, we [Venezuelans] were so good to each other. We try not to bring the political things [into conversation], if you want to uh, be very good with each other, better leave the political alone.

Overall, Ana is having a positive experience as an international student in the U.S., despite the stress she encountered when she first arrived. Since Ana is able to embrace both the languages and cultural practices of the home and host culture as an international student, she claims that at present, she (and her fellow Venezuelan international students) is able to switch behaviors depending on which social group she is associating with at a given time.

We [Venezuelans] have to be aware of it [behavior]. You have to be careful with it, because sometimes people don't get it the right way. We speak Spanish when we are together. Yeah, we don't have to make that effort. It's not like we care of making that effort, like 'Ah! The Americans are coming (laughs) and we have to speak English!' No! We have this switch, like, there's an American. And you start speaking English, and we don't care. We don't care at all now. You know you are gonna have to deal with it [encountering Americans] at some point.

Leo. Leo identifies himself as a 19-year-old Latino international business student who has truly enjoyed the past two and a half years he has spent attending a university in the United States. Leo's confidence, outgoing personality and multiple previous experiences in the U.S. have influenced his life in the Midwest, and this is evident throughout his personal account. Leo visited Florida and California several times for family vacations when he was 13, but his first long-term encounter with American culture occurred in 2010 when he spent his senior year of high school in the Midwest.

I went to [high school in the Midwest] as a foreign exchange student. I visited the U.S. before, just a couple of trips with my family. We just wanted to come here, do shopping, we just wanted to travel abroad so we decided to come here, and I like it a lot. I like English a lot. I've been playing video games and watching movies and I like English. In all of my 14 years of school, I was top of my class in English. Like, I would always get good grades.

Due to Leo's fondness of the English language, English is a factor that pushed him to not only spend his senior year in the Midwest, but to continue his higher education in the U.S. as well. "I like to speak English a lot, all my life, so I think that is the main reason why I chose the U.S. [for college]." Also, his first impression of the U.S. as a high school student was a factor in his decision to return to the U.S. to obtain his university education.

It was more of a wonderland, the land of dreams. American dream. Which is like a childish thing because, like nothing is perfect anywhere. But, this is a more organized country, and I like a lot of stuff in the country, like the government, the judicial system. I like a lot of the aspects here in the U.S. I was expecting just like a regular system of just like in Venezuela and stuff, but here it's a lot better.

Leo's admittance that he prefers the government in the host country is a reflection of the negative feelings he holds towards the Venezuelan political system, and although he did not specifically say it, the unstable government in his home country pushed him to study abroad as well.

The political situation that is going on in Venezuela is like, there's a political situation and I don't like the government right now. They've been pretty strict about some stuff, you cannot get even foreign money and stuff, and they're trying to become socialism in Venezuela, which I don't agree. I agree with democracy and with a free market system. So the political situation was something that (pause) was a matter of concern for me.

Another major factor influencing Leo's decision to attend a university abroad was the array of resources and organizations available in the U.S. that could enhance one's future chances of obtaining a job. Leo explained his astonishment at the options open to him in the U.S:

You have the opportunity to get involved with a lot of different organizations, fraternities, sororities, sports, uh, student government, those kinds of stuff that helps with your personal growth. More opportunities, definitely. These colleges in the U.S., it's like you're in college and you have to take care of your classes, but you also have to build up your resume. It gives you an open case for companies to give you more opportunities for your jobs and internships. So that's really different.

Furthermore, Leo is active on campus and is involved in several organizations. "I am also a leader on campus. I stay involved. I am involved with Pi Kappa Phi fraternity, and with many other organizations including [engineering organization], I'm treasurer. I'm captain of the soccer team." He also articulated how this campus involvement allowed him to meet new individuals and form social bonds: "Like, when I came here, I feel like this was my home. I got involved in

campus right away, with different organizations and they helped me to get to know all of the people on campus. Connections and all kinds of stuff.”

Leo has established connections with fellow co-nationals in the U.S. that he met through the International Student Association, and he is close with his American fraternity brothers as well. He explains that both groups are like his family. He conveyed that the Venezuelan international students are a family unit to him because they share the same values and “warm” affectionate behaviors:

So, like I get to meet all the Venezuelans during the orientation and they introduced me to their friends. They had like their little Venezuelan circle that they always hang out. I feel more warm with them, I can’t really explain it. Like, more sense of a family that I have with them. It’s like something, a bond that is more than friendship. It’s like we share a set of values that we have in our nation, that we have in our country and we live by all of those values. People in Venezuela are usually more talkative, usually more happy all the time. They wanna make conversations.

However, Leo also highly values his interactions with his American fraternity brothers and he admits that even though his co-national student friends are important and he attends special events with them such as birthday parties, he spends nearly all of his time with American students because he deeply desires to learn the culture of the host country to obtain skills and social networks that may provide more opportunities for a future in the U.S.

I joined a fraternity, and they gave me all kinds of resources to be part of a brotherhood. And that’s how I feel with all of these people. They are more than my friends. They are my family. They are my family here and it’s different from everybody else. Like I have friends here, but these guys are my family. I came here [to the U.S.] to study abroad. I

left my family, my friends in order to speak English and to get involved to maybe get a job after college and I needed an American environment. Eh, I love all the Venezuelans here. They are my family. They are like my second family, they really are. My fraternity's also a family... but I spend more time with Americans because I left Venezuela, as I said, I left my friends and everything, and if I would want to speak Spanish and have Venezuelan parties all the time I will still be in Venezuela. But, I really feel like I really have to be in an American environment to live this experience at a hundred percent.

Spending a significant amount of time with host nationals not only helped Leo practice the English language, he also admitted that he tries to spend time with Americans in order to avoid a severe source of stress that he encounters as an international university student, namely homesickness.

When you interact with the same people in the same group and if you're in a different country or something like that, you get homesick. You get (pause) more homesick than you would if you try to interact with other people, out of that circle. I hate to be sad. I miss my country so much. I miss all of that. But I just can't give myself an opportunity to be sad all the time. So that's why I try to interact with Americans more than with Venezuelans.

He also shared that not only does spending time with his American social group allow him to cope with his bouts of homesickness, he also combats this stressor by limiting communication with his family to once a week and by severing all lines of communication with his friends in Venezuela when he is studying in the U.S. "So, when I come here [U.S.] I cut all

contact with all of my Venezuelans because of different reasons. Not only because I don't have free time but also because I might get homesick."

Homesickness is not the only stress that Leo has experienced during his two and a half years attending the university in the Midwestern U.S. Although speaking English at this point in his life is "not a barrier at all. Sometimes, it's still (pause) sometimes. But there's nothing I don't feel capable of. Like when I'm talking or something, and even if I mess up some words, I kind of rephrase myself. I always get to my point. So, I feel confident at college." However, Leo laments that even though he can speak fluent English, it is his accent that causes intense aggravation. In fact, he is ashamed of his accent and tried to rid himself of it in the past, but did not succeed.

Definitely my accent [is frustrating] when people don't understand what I'm saying. It's really annoying. But with my accent and the way I talk, it's different because I really wanna try all kinds of ways (pause). I try to hang only with the people who can teach me to speak [English] pretty well and that's [accent] something I cannot get rid of. So like, that's really hard. It really, really frustrates me when somebody cannot understand and I do not get mad at them at all. It's just something I cannot change about myself and I have to accept it and live with it because that's part of the person that I am.

Therefore, as illustrated above, Leo not only associates primarily with his American social network for the sake of avoiding homesickness, but to learn proper pronunciation of the English language. Additionally, Leo's intrigue and respect for American cultural values also draws him to interact with host nationals on a daily basis. "You guys [Americans] have a lot of integrity. You guys have a lot of diversity. I like that a lot. And one of the values that I like is that you guys are also pretty organized." The Venezuelan values of family, perseverance and a

perpetual positive attitude are important to Leo as well, and when asked if he had lost any of these values he firmly asserted, “No. Not at all. They remain here (touches his chest).”

When questioned about his future goals, Leo described that they depend on the political situation in his home country: “I have two plans. Going back to Venezuela or stay here. Take over my family business or stay here and get a full time job with a company. It depends on the political situation that is going on in Venezuela. My president has cancer, so I don’t know if he’s gonna die, what’s gonna happen.”

Leo described that since he has spent a significant amount of time living in the U.S., but has also spent his youth in Venezuela and is encompassed by the home culture when he visits his family each year, he claims to have developed two unique identities specific to the social environment he is in.

I know it sounds a little crazy, but I consider that I have two (pause) that I am a different person when I’m here and a different person when I’m in Venezuela. So, like when I come here I cut all contact with Venezuelans. But I go back to Venezuela twice a year, like every year, so when I go back I’m only with them and I don’t talk to anybody here. So like, that’s why I’m kind of like two different persons, two different people. Two groups, two identities. When I’m here [U.S.] I talk to my friends from America and when I’m back in Venezuela I just talk to them [Venezuelans].

Leo says when he is in his home country with his friends and family, “It’s my time to be a Venezuelan again,” meaning that he can utilize those values and behaviors specific to Venezuela. His experience during his year as a high school student in the U.S. provided him with the opportunity to discover that there is the “Venezuelan [Leo] and the American [Leo]” and he explained that he does not believe he can be both at once. “You cannot be part of two cultures in

a specific environment. That's my opinion. So, I'm comfortable in both environments. I can be part of different environments, and I'm happy doing it."

Overall, Leo's acculturation experience as an international student has been constructive due to his intense involvement on campus, which allowed him to form strong social networks (both with co-nationals and especially with Americans) and in turn, cope with his homesickness and the frustration he associates with his accent.

Anita. Anita is 18-years-old and proud to be a Latina from Venezuela. She has lived in the U.S. as an international student for one year and is majoring in marketing. Anita's reserved nature and underlying, yet intense pride in her home country are apparent in the words she uses to recount her experience thus far in the Midwestern U.S. Even though she spent four-week increments in the Southern U.S. to visit family during 2006 and 2008, she spent one month with her older brother in 2010 visiting his university campus, which is located in the Midwestern U.S., and was immersed in U.S. culture. It was this particular visit that played a role in making Anita feel comfortable enough to ultimately make the decision to further her own higher education at this same institution in the states. "I came because my brother was here. That's the first reason, and because I was looking for a better future for me."

A second main factor that strongly influenced Anita's choice in attending the same Midwestern university as her sibling was the amount of danger she experienced in her home country, and her desire to escape from it. "Right now in my country, there is no future. No. For (pause) because of the president. He's too (lowers voice) bad. So, there's no future in my country right now. These days insecurity is high. I think that we're not safe there."

When Anita visited her brother's university for the first time in 2010, she felt that she was truly gleaning an idea of what behaviors and values were upheld in the U.S. because she was

spending a significant amount of time among Americans in various social settings. She recalled her first experience on campus with her brother:

Oh my God, it [America] was so clean! Clean, like organized! Like I feel I can go out and nothing would happen to me. Like I was safe. So yeah, it was awesome. Hm, okay I'm thinking. Americans are very polite. Um, I think that's the biggest. They are very polite, and I like that! They hold your door, and it's really good.

Anita's initial feelings regarding the U.S. values and behaviors she experienced during her first campus visit have not dissipated since she migrated to the Midwest, moved in with her brother, and enrolled as a full time university student. She still believes Americans are orderly and polite. In fact, she claimed that she has adopted some of these American values. "I am more quiet, more polite. Yeah, I hold the door. I'm one of the people who hold the door!" But she also explains that the Venezuelan values of respect, affection, and family are, and will remain, a large part of who she is as a person. "Yeah, I think (pause), I'm still having- I don't want to lose my Venezuelan habits maybe? Cause I love 'em. I don't wanna lost it."

These feelings of pride in and loyalty towards the values of her home country are reflected in the social group with which she spends nearly all of her time, and this group consists of fellow Venezuelan international students. Anita's brother initially introduced her to the other Venezuelans on campus when she still lived in Venezuela via a social network site, so when she arrived on campus the friendships had already been established. "Facebook! Yeah, I was in Venezuela when my brother – he was here [U.S.] – he was telling me, 'Okay, there's seven Venezuelans coming. Okay, there's the first name.' And we look for the name and we talk with that person."

Anita expressed how her main social group consists of fellow Venezuelan international students and that she spends nearly all the time she is able to with them.

Okay, like with Americans, I spend maybe two days a week. When I'm in class, I'm with Americans. Yeah, but I don't speak like, with them too much. And I – I'm always with someone from Venezuela. Always. I think that I belong to the Venezuelan group because I spend most of my time with them. Since I wake up, I'm [living] with a Venezuelan, my brother. Then I go out to classes walking with my friend [from Venezuela] and we meet another friend from Venezuela, and we walk together to classes and we wait till the other one [Venezuelan] get out of class and we (pause) walk to lunch or, yeah. We're always together. Always.

The main reason behind Anita's need to spend so much time with her co-nationals is because she lacks a desire to befriend Americans, and she considers that other Venezuelan students are better able to relate to her situation as a foreign student. She describes how she feels when interacting with other Venezuelans: "Really good. Like I'm home. I feel like I am home. Cause they're exactly like me. They talk in my language (pause) they know my culture. It's comfortable to be with them." Anita also communicates with her family in Venezuela every day, and considering that her main social group in the host country consists of fellow Venezuelans, she successfully surrounds herself with the language and culture that she is accustomed to. She admitted that she converses with her parents often because she misses them, and she shares how she considers the other Venezuelan international students to be her family in this new sociocultural environment: "I knew people from Venezuela [who are now in the U.S.] and we were, made like this strong relationship and we're still friends. We do everything together

because we are like a family here [U.S.]. This is like my second family, because they are just like me. So, it's cool."

Anita preferred to speak Spanish with her co-nationals not only because it is familiar, but also because she experienced intense stress when she spoke with host nationals in English. She was not confident in her English abilities since she only studied the language for one year in Venezuela.

Um, well, it [speaking English] is difficult sometimes. I don't understand everything that they [Americans] say. Because it's too fast or there are words that I don't understand, because like, I'm learning. I'm still learning English, and it's hard but I try. The first thing I say is don't make fun of me because I'm learning. I might do some mistakes.

Speaking with members of her co-national social group for a significant amount of time each day allows Anita to cope with her difficulties with the English language, not because they practice English together to improve her skills, rather, they speak Spanish and thereby remove the need for Anita to worry about communicating her thoughts and feelings in English. "They [Venezuelans] talk in my language (pause) they know my culture. It's comfortable to be with them." She even stated how her brother and other Venezuelan friends often help her with difficult homework assignments because she would rather seek assistance from members of her home culture than American peers.

However, the English language was not Anita's only stress inducing factor in the U.S. During her past 12 months of living near campus, she has been subjected to discrimination both within the classroom setting and during extracurricular and athletic university events.

One thing that pissed me off is that they [American students] all thought that we [Venezuelans] were Mexicans. Like, all people, they say, 'Oh! From which part of

Mexico is Venezuela?’ I was like, no. They’re like, ‘Do you speak Mexican?’ And I hate that. Yeah. I put like strong words, no I’m not Mexican. And um, like something that happened this Saturday, in the [football] game, was like racism, from Latinos. All my friends is talking in Spanish, and an American was like, ‘I don’t understand, go back to your country.’ And we were like, okay. I feel bad because it’s like we are the foreigners here. Yeah, I feel bad.

This discrimination caused Anita to have feelings of guilt over being a “foreigner” and an individual who is not a member of the dominant society. However, her strong dependence on and connection with other Venezuelan international students allowed her to cope with this anxiety because she and some members of her main social group reacted to the aforementioned discriminatory act by portraying pride in their home country. After the American at the football game told her and her friends to “go back to your country,” Anita explained: “Between us we talked about it. We didn’t care. We still, like, we started singing in Spanish. We were like, I don’t care. Yeah! I’m proud to be Latina. I’m proud to be from Venezuela. I don’t care what people say. I’m proud of my country.”

However, a somewhat contradictory response to this coping mechanism of showing pride in Venezuela occurred when Anita was asked if she had lost any Venezuelan attitudes or behaviors during her stay in the U.S. She honestly responded: “No, I just want to like, maybe hide ‘em. If they are not good. If people doesn’t feel comfortable with them, I try to hide ‘em. But I love how Venezuela attitude is.” It appears that if Anita is within the classroom setting or away from her main social network of co-nationals she is shy and reserved, but she is able to speak her mind and portray the pride she holds for her country in situations when other members of her main social network are present.

In general, Anita is having an experience in the U.S. that reflects both positive and negative aspects. She enjoys her time with her co-national social group. She claims, “I belong to the Venezuelan group” because their values and behaviors are familiar and their experiences are similar to her own. Conversely, her direct encounters with Americans thus far have been mostly unconstructive and tainted with racist, discriminatory remarks. Therefore, it is not surprising that Anita prefers the sense of security and stability her co-nationals provide at this Midwestern university. In the future, Anita plans to become bilingual, graduate from marketing, start a family and “then work and be a successful. Be successful.” She also states that she may remain in the U.S., unless there is a major political change in her home country. “If the president [of Venezuela] changes I’m definitely going back there [Venezuela] and make a better future for my country, there’s no better country than mine.”

David. Twenty-two year old David was the first Venezuelan international student to arrive on the Midwestern university’s campus nearly four years ago, and as such, his intriguing experience in the United States has produced both a social network and welcoming haven for fellow South American students. David’s professional demeanor and the firsthand insight he has obtained about U.S. culture are evident in his presentation of the life he has built as a chemical engineering student in new and unfamiliar sociocultural surroundings. Regarding prior experience in the U.S., David had spent a month in Florida during 2006 to visit extended family, a trip that he classifies as “fun times. We were just buying a lot of stuff and going shopping every day.” The trip consisted of small, isolated incidents with Americans, so he was only able to observe U.S. culture at a very superficial level. He admitted that in the years following this trip when he was reviewing his options for higher education (both in and outside of Venezuela), part

of his impression of the American university social scene and overall academic experience was created by media images he viewed in films.

I was expecting college to be crazy, and be you know, crazy parties and people going nuts and the cops coming to get the underage drinkers, you know, getting kind of wild. So, that was kind of what I was expecting college to be. And I was expecting, you know, big classrooms, big lecture halls, and the professor that, you know, knows it all, super intelligent. Because that's what you kind of see from the states is what they show in the movies. So, my impressions was pretty much that, what they show in movies. I knew I had to work hard, so I really wanted an environment in which (pause) I could actually study.

However, his personal ideas of the American university atmosphere were deeply influenced by the research David conducted as he explored U.S. institutions of higher learning to discover if studying abroad was a more viable and constructive option. Various factors converged to play a role in David's ultimate decision to study in the U.S.; he essentially compared the sociopolitical climates and financial opportunities between his home country and the United States.

Um, when I was looking for different options to go to college in Venezuela, I just got interested to have a different, like another door to knock on, you know, several options for me to pick the best one. I had the opportunity of getting a good scholarship from [the Midwestern U.S. university], and I took into consideration several factors. So, the first was political, social and economical situation of my country, and how difficult it is to get a good job, and to have a pretty good start to your career versus the political, social and

economical situation here in the States, and how much easier it is for students to, you know, start a career... So, that was the biggest factor took into consideration.

In addition to displaying his belief that the U.S. offered a more valuable option to building a future career, David was not ignorant of the realities related to the lack of safety in his hometown of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. When asked what he thought of the U.S. at this point in time he shared: “You are set for success [in America]. And, you know, how safe it is here. In my city [Caracas], they kill 53 people every week. So those kinds of reasons are what I – why I consider this country [America] to be a great country to live in.”

David also purposefully chose to study in the Midwestern region of the United States so that he could immerse himself in the host culture and situate himself apart from his own culture.

I did want to go up north. I did not want to go south because I thought, if I really wanted to take advantage of being away, and I really wanted to know the [U.S.] culture in depth, and if I really wanted to know the [English] language, I needed to be in a place where South Americans and Hispanics were none (pause), not none, but reduced or limited. I didn’t want to go anyplace where there’s a strong Latino population. I really wanted to get the true American experience.

David also found the U.S. option appealing because he wanted to build upon his nine years of English study to obtain “strong skills on a second language, which is pretty important in modern society and the modern business. This is how I’m improving myself and getting the best education I could’ve gotten.” He also firmly believes that the U.S. was the best option for his future because of the numerous, advantageous resources accessible to all students.

You [Americans] have all the different resources that the university provides you with. I mean, computer labs with all the different softwares you need, you know, to get your

work done. You have tutors; you got professors that are really there to help you. Um, you have study rooms, you have the library which is a great resource, printers everywhere for you to print what you need. Because of that, you – you're set to success.

David's four-year journey as an international student has contained both encouraging and discouraging incidents, and he described the overall experience: "It's been like a roller coaster actually." His experience in the Midwestern U.S. began on a downward slope because "I felt that I was too (pause) alone, and that I needed people to be comfortable with. I couldn't relate myself to my [American] roommates or the people I met in the dorms." In the beginning of his stay in the host country, David felt isolated from the dominant culture and disconnected from host nationals, and these negative feelings nearly pushed him to return home. "So I was feeling completely loneliness, and not in the right spot. Uh, up to that point I was like, I'm quitting and after this semester, I'm done."

Stress was also brought about during the first months of his sojourn when David faced discrimination from his classmates when he felt that he was labeled as an outsider who could not communicate in English and therefore, had nothing to offer in the academic setting.

Because sometimes you, you feel judged here and uh, sometimes people doesn't wanna team up with you because of the language barriers. So, if it's an English class, no one wants to be with 'the guy who doesn't speak English.' You know, so you feel kind of put aside and out of place. You kind of feel like you don't belong here and you shouldn't be here.

Interestingly, although these in-class incidents were hurtful to David, he utilized them to fuel his determination to work harder and ultimately succeed. "I'm the kind of person that, if you don't wanna work with me because you think I'm not gonna do a good job, I'm gonna do the

best job ever. So that [discriminatory gesture] actually motivated me to be better. Still does.”

David also found strength by finding the similarities between the host culture and his own culture. “You start thinking, you know, how fortunate you are to um, be here [U.S.] and try to get around with the people and try to get used to how the people is and try just not to focus on the differences but what you have in common.”

This newfound, positive attitude drove David to join multiple on campus organizations and participate in work-related internships, and these experiences allowed him to develop two social networks that also greatly helped him cope with the aforementioned stresses in different ways. As a member of the International Student Association, David was introduced to another Venezuelan international student near the middle of his first semester, and all at once more South Americans arrived on campus. “So, once the other two got here, we were four, four Venezuelans and a couple of Columbians, and we were close friends. We decided to create [an organization for South American students].” This particular organization offered South American students a place to “see that familiar face,” and it gave David and his co-nationals a chance to “be around people you actually feel comfortable with.” David expressed that the Venezuelan international students have started building a social network within the university. “We’re all tied together. Venezuelans, we’re extremely close. It’s a big network; it’s what gets us all in touch. Uh, you’re sharing your culture and you’re sharing your heritage with your friends among the campus.”

Therefore, this social network of co-nationals allowed David to exercise the values and behaviors of his home culture because within this group he felt a strong sense of belonging as if he was “at home.”

You feel home [with Venezuealns] because you are truly yourself. With the Venezuelans, it’s more like family. You feel the necessity of being around them. All what I got is them,

and all what they got is me. Whenever we [Venezuelans] are altogether, we are loud and you know, we hug each other and we kiss the girls on the cheeks every time we say hi. You know, you are just being you. No limitations. Um, you're not doing it [being affectionate] consciously; it's just something that happens because that's how you grew up.

However, David also reached out to and formed social connections with Americans by joining an engineering group and participating in internships. These social networks were equally beneficial to David because they allowed him to learn about and adapt to the host culture and utilize the English language at a deeper level.

For example, when I became friends with [American students], I was actually getting the American side that I wasn't. You know, I was actually getting to understand the culture I was immersed in. And that allowed me to be friends with people. I started joining different organizations on campus, and I could find all the different things that I have I didn't know Americans have as well. The different things we have in common that make, you know, friendships stronger.

In his internship experiences, David explains that he met “people from different places within the States. To be in the co-op, and to have now, not only the college side of it [study abroad] and how people interacts within school, but also in the professional side and how business is.” Overall, these interactions with Americans have proven to be beneficial. “Uh, my English skills are, you know, a lot better than they used to be and I understand the culture a lot – a lot better. Which is important.”

David also places significance upon both the American values of honesty and respect and the Venezuelan values of hard work and family. He feels that both social groups form a part of

who he is as an individual in the U.S. “I like spending time with both [social groups]. As I said, whenever I’m with the South Americans I feel at home, but I’ve also got to feel really, really comfortable around Americans. Which is incredible to me.” He relates that he feels he has established different connections to these social groups. “I always feel attached to the Venezuelans. I feel the family bond with the Venezuelans, with the South Americans. But with my American friends it is more like a genuine friendship.”

Even though David has developed strong social bonds with both co-nationals and host nationals, he admitted that his behaviors and levels of confidence shift depending on the social context he is a part of at a given moment.

Sometimes, it depends, you know, on the context of the – of the situation. I’m more shy in some, uh, so for example in a school related environment. It’s quite challenging when it’s school related. Not challenging, but I’m a little more shy. And the reason why is, it’s because again, you kinda get the feeling (pause). At school, sometimes you feel, you know, kind of neglected. Not neglected, or, you know, put aside, a little bit.

Conversely he stated he feels more at ease “at a party” or “at lunch,” or in similar social situations that are less formal, especially if he is among co-national students.

Looking towards the future, David possesses personal, professional, and academic goals. First, he wants to “leave a good impression of my country, that’s my biggest goal.” This goal is close to his heart. “I am extremely, extremely proud of being Venezuelan. I think the most rewarding goal for me would be sharing my culture.”

Professionally, he would like to obtain a full time job in the international division of a multinational U.S. Company, obtain a worker’s visa and eventually gain permanent residency status so he can travel to various countries for work. Academically, “I wanna get an MBA in

management and a PhD in something related to it.” Therefore, it is evident that David’s experience in the U.S. did in fact have its ups and downs, but he is optimistic about the future that lies ahead in the U.S. because of the social networks, cultural lessons, and resources that he will continue to utilize to transform his dreams into reality.

Ivan. Ivan has truly enjoyed the past three years that he has spent in the Midwestern U.S. studying sales and marketing, and he recognizes the role that the advice and encouragement from his Venezuelan family played in preparing him to study and work abroad and ultimately become a confident, successful 21-year-old. Ivan’s self-assurance, determination and admiration for his family are illustrated throughout his sharing of his personal experience in the U.S. Ivan’s pride towards and affection for his family is evident, and he discussed how they are a unique group of people who have shaped his ideas towards culture and prompted him to view life from a global perspective.

I come from a big family. They are um, very, very culturally different. My family comes from different places around the world. My uh, grandpa’s from Germany, my grandma was born in New York. My other grandpa’s from Ecuador and my other grandma is the daughter of Spaniards. As I said, my family comes from different parts of the world. They had to move from their original country, most of them, and then find their home in Venezuela. The way my grandpa would say it is, ‘Your home and your country or whatever you belong to is where you want to be.’

Ivan’s parents also played a significant role in influencing his choices regarding his education because they had once studied in the U.S. and spoke very positively of their own experience as international college students.

My parents themselves studied in the U.S. as well, um, right after they married. They studied in the University of Texas, and then my mom got pregnant and they moved to Venezuela when I was about to be born. They always spoke very, very highly about this country. Um, they always remember their stay over here; always remember their experience in college. They would make it sound so great that not even Disneyland would compare to it. But now that I'm here by myself, I understand what it's worth. I know that if my parents say they had a really good experience here (pause), it's because it was.

Before his initial visit to the U.S., Ivan admitted that he was only able to learn about the American people and culture through the stories of his parents and what he saw on television programs. "The idea I had of it [U.S.] before my own experience, it would be what the television would show. You know, it would be like *Friends*, Warner Brothers, whatever shows they would show. Sitcoms and stuff like that. That's all I really knew."

However, Ivan's perspective of the U.S. became more clear and comprehensible when he journeyed to the Midwest in 2009 to complete a year of high school as an exchange student. Prior to his departure to the U.S. as a high school exchange student, two prestigious Venezuelan universities had already accepted him, but he wanted to experience firsthand the awe-inspiring culture that his parents had described to him throughout his life. "In general, you know, my parents did it before me and I was raised like, always having the idea in my mind that I might go study abroad." Ivan described his year as a high school exchange student as a positive "culture shock" and the final factor that pushed him to pursue his higher education in the States.

And I became an exchange student witnessing – was part of the culture over here – and it was definitely a culture shock. For the first time in my life I witnessed an environment

where I was safe, where I was comfortable, um, you know, where opportunities could be handed, not handed to me, but they could be at reach for me if I actually worked for them. Many different factors were involving the fact that I felt like I had a better chance of getting an education here than back home. I decided to go abroad for a year [as an exchange student] and then after two months here I already wanted to stay [in the U.S.].

In fact, Ivan recounted that the majority of the stresses he has experienced throughout his young adulthood are connected to his life in Venezuela. Although he claims that the Venezuelan values of affection and family are a cherished part of his identity, his personal perceptions of his home country were overwhelmingly negative, and he explained how life there was difficult due to high levels of violence and the impulsiveness of others. This violence may be due in part to the heated political debate between the Chavistas and the opposition.

[Life in Venezuela] is stressful. I mean, um, Venezuela is a beautiful place. I love my country, ok? But in all honesty, Venezuela is the kind of place that – it's just Venezuela, is just unpredictable. And that involves the population as well. Um, like just yesterday, my parents got mugged. Right in the middle of the street at 11 a.m. They [the criminals] took their cell phones and their wedding rings, right there. Um, luckily that's all that happened. Usually someone gets hurt, someone gets shot or someone gets killed. Ok, a little statistic here. Last year, during 2011 there were in Caracas, there was a total of 17,500 homicides. That is around I think, 48 or 49 homicides per day. That's the city I'm from. I mean I had friends in high school getting kidnapped. I had, uh, friends getting gun pointed. So with that I can tell you how my life was in Venezuela.

Ivan went on to describe his home country as a “very materialistic place” where people judge one another based on their clothing, homes, or the cars they drive. “In Venezuela I used to

be a lot more paranoid about stuff. I would have to be more alert all the time. Here [U.S.] I can let my guard down a little bit more because I'm in an environment that allows me to." He truly feels a sense of belonging within the American culture and U.S. society.

I mean here [U.S.] I feel like I can express myself better with what I want, what I want to wear, and stuff like that. Things that are just not as comfortable to do in Venezuela. It's just being apart from that [Venezuelan materialism] is a lot better. Now that I'm here, I'm actually part of the society, well I believe I'm part of the society. Um, I feel safe. I feel comfortable. I feel welcomed. I feel like one of 'em [Americans].

Therefore, sojourning to the U.S. to live as an international student allowed Ivan to escape from the dangers and social pressures he encountered in his home country and establish himself within a safe, hospitable environment. Making social connections with American host nationals in the college setting proved to be both an unproblematic and beneficial transition for Ivan, especially since his first college roommate was an American student he met during his year as a high school exchange student.

Uh, I got here in 2010. Um, I mean when I got here I only knew one person. It was my roommate. My roommate was from [Midwestern high school], and we were really good friends. He was an American and we lived in an international house on campus. I am an international student, although I am not involved with international groups. And during my first semester I rushed a fraternity, which I'm part of right now and that has allowed me to expand on things that I do on campus. It got me a job. Um, it got me a really good internship. It's really opened many different opportunities.

Even though Ivan immediately became a part of the host national social circle when he arrived at his university and joined organizations mostly dominated by American students, he did

encounter co-nationals from Venezuela during his first few weeks abroad. He met several other Venezuelans during student orientation, and although he claims they are all “great people,” he explains that he chose to break away from the co-national group because such a decision freed him to explore other social groups, and he was able to establish a genuine sense of belonging with host nationals. Also, since Ivan does not hold certain aspects of his home country in high esteem, it may have been easier for him to distance himself from other Venezuelan international students.

The way I live I spend more time with Americans than with Venezuelans. Let me see, how can I explain this without sounding a little bit rude, uh, towards the Venezuelans. Um, when I got here I realized that Venezuelans, all the Venezuelans were always hanging out with each other. They were always together; they’re always in the same circle, day and night, all the time. And I knew that if I wanted to become what I am today, that was gonna be a problem. So, at the beginning when I needed them they were great. They helped me out, they helped me establish those first few weeks, then after that I said thank you very much but I’m gonna try and make my own friends and make my own name in this university. So I started expanding on my own. I started getting involved with other organizations, people on campus, so by doing so I found myself, you know, like I live in a house full of Americans in my fraternity house.

Ivan believes that he owes his deep-rooted connection to host nationals and his lack of social stresses in the host country to his impeccable English skills. When Ivan was nine years old, he was able to take private English lessons in Venezuela with a professor for three years, and these lessons allowed him to glean a large vocabulary, learn proper pronunciation techniques, and eventually eliminated his accent.

It's hard for me to sometimes explain that I'm an international student when I introduce myself because I don't sound, you know, foreign, or anything like it. I've never had any [social] problems with anybody. Um, you know I think that I – I will say that I know that part of it is because of my lack of accent. Um, I feel people are more welcoming and more accepting because of it. I know other students that might have a thicker accent get a little bit bullied by some people, sometimes.

The only minor stress that Ivan reported experiencing as an international university student was job related. "A huge thing for me was my job. As an international student, I can only work on campus. I'm grateful for it but I'm limited to only 20 hours per week. And I feel that, I would like to have the chance of having a job somewhere else with better pay." He says this type of stress is the only way he feels different from the mainstream U.S. population. He worries about obtaining a full time position after graduation as well:

I wanna have my – a good job. A good, solid job where I can like settle into it and be happy with it. But the investment – money and time investment is a risk. So finding a job like that is definitely, definitely a stressful thought that I have in my mind. Everyday.

To cope with the aforementioned stress, Ivan began browsing for job positions that he may be able to obtain in the future by preparing now by being involved on campus, establishing social networks and meeting new people. Finding a job and establishing a career in the U.S. are particularly imperative to Ivan because he plans to stay in the U.S. after college to work and eventually start his own family. Ivan's experience as an international student attending a Midwestern university has been unique in that he feels less stress and a deeper sense of belonging among host nationals, yet he refuses to say that he is obligated to one social group or another because he views himself as an independent social actor.

For me there's no Venezuelan, there's no American, there's a [Ivan]. I am Venezuelan, I'll always be Venezuelan but (pause) when it comes down to a group, I'm a citizen of the world. I'm a person that lives here, and that's where I am. As long as I know who I am, without really committing myself to any specific group, I know I'm gonna be fine. Because it's all about where I put myself in. There's no Venezuelan [Ivan], American [Ivan], there's just the [Ivan] that's just a mix of everything.

Nola. Nola is a very vibrant 21-year-old woman who was born and raised in Venezuela and is currently studying mechanical engineering in the States, although she admitted that her deeper interests lie in aerospace engineering. She has vacationed in Florida each summer since 1991 to visit family, but those experiences did not sway her to move abroad because she was close to and dependent upon her family in Venezuela. She explained that the main reason behind her choice to study at a university in the U.S. was twofold. First, her best friend from school “really liked” the U.S. and urged her saying, “Yeah, we should definitely try to do it [study abroad],” so she knew she would not have to be alone when adjusting to the new culture. Second, Nola was quite disturbed when the Venezuelan federal government administered a vocational exam during her senior year that did not seem to fit her professional interests or needs.

That one year when I graduated from high school that class was the first class to get, um, kinda forced to take this vocational (lowers her voice) you could say, exam. And it was one of those exams where they ask you like, ‘What do you want to do?’ So I um, took the test and they told me I could either be a civil engineer or a theatre major. I was like, hm, it sounds like they are telling me what to do. I'm not gonna let anyone tell me what to do.

Following this incident with the vocational exam, Nola researched universities in the U.S. through a private organization in Venezuela until she located an institution in the Midwestern

U.S. that was both affordable for her family and one that contained a group of Venezuelan students. She initially conversed with these students via the Internet until her arrival to the U.S. in 2009, and then she met them in person at the international student orientation. During the beginning of her sojourn abroad, this co-national social group offered Nola comfort and familiarity, but the relationship with some group members was short lived because she felt certain friendships she had established were not genuine.

Well, in the beginning when it was just a few of us [Venezuelan international students], it was nice. It was just like having a piece of home every once in a while. Um, then we grew a little bit. Then (casts eyes downward) when we grew a lot, it started getting a little bit uncomfortable because – you felt that they were being friends with you just because you were Venezuelan, so they have to be your friend by default, you know? They really don't like you; it's just that you are Venezuelan so they have to be friends with you. So, I'm sticking with the ones [Venezuelan students] that I actually know that are my friends.

Although Nola became part of a more intimate social group consisting of other Venezuelan international students (for example, her roommate is Venezuelan), these relationships did not prevent her from experiencing stress during the beginning of her sojourn in the U.S. Despite the fact that she had studied English for 18 years in a bi-lingual school in Venezuela, she feared the consequences she would incur when host nationals realized she was from another country due to her accent.

Well, the beginning was really hard. It was my first time ever being away from home or away from my family and doing everything on my own. I don't regret anything at all. Of course, I was like, in culture shock. I didn't consider myself bilingual when I first came

here. I knew English, but I was so shy. And I was like, what if they find out I'm not from here? What if they think I'm a retard because I'm talking like this [with an accent]?

In order to cope with the aforementioned stressors, Nola admitted that she had to build her confidence and speak English as best as she could in order to interact with Americans.

It took me two weeks to realize, hey, they [Americans] know I'm not from here. It's obvious. So I might as well just stop being silly and just talk. So that's what I did and I found new friends like [American friend]. I told him, you need to tell me like, every time I'm saying something wrong. He's like, 'Okay, I'll correct you.' So he still does it all the time (smiles) and uh, that has helped me a lot actually because the language was one of the things that made me feel like, not at home, until I got used to it. I actually feel comfortable with it.

At present, Nola feels "very, very, very comfortable" speaking English and interacting with her American social group because the members of that group know her and are accustomed to her accent: "Once I know people and they know I'm a foreigner, they know how I am. I'm just who I am." Nola also relies upon her host national friends to assist her academically when she feels stress related to schoolwork and exams. "Stressful (pause) school! All the time! I always have a group to study before each class. I grab a few students, which I always do my homework with and all that."

Besides encountering stresses due to linguistic differences, interestingly Nola has also experienced anxiety as a result of adopting a value of the host culture. Throughout her time in the U.S., Nola has embraced what she refers to as the American value of independence, even though at first it was an odd concept for her to initially understand because she was shocked that anyone would want to live apart from his or her family. "I learned how to be independent. Like, since I

came here it's something really normal here to be without your parents. And I'm like; I just have to do this. It's normal. Everyone does it, why can't I?" Consequently, at times this newfound independence was the same factor that caused Nola to become distraught:

When I'm in exams, and when everything just, when it gets overwhelming is when you have exams and bills and other stuff to do like laundry and cleaning, and I just got a dog! I don't have my parents to help me – and I don't have time! Um, like when everything comes together it's really stressful.

Nola has been able to manage her time in a constructive way so that she can study for exams and then tend to other responsibilities, and this idea of time management is another American value that she agrees with. However, although Nola spends most of her time among host nationals in and outside of the classroom, especially since her current boyfriend is an American, when asked the question if she noticed any differences between her home country and the U.S., she elaborated on multiple dissimilarities. Even though she was able to comment on various differences between the two countries, she merely is aware of them and does not consider these distinctions to be “a bad thing.”

There are a lot of differences. The weather! (Laughs) I mean it's so different I cannot really name just something. The culture's different, the people are different, and people look different. Um, they act different. The food is different. I feel like everything here has calories! Even the water! I don't know, there's so many differences, so many I cannot even think. It's not a bad thing though, I like differences.

Nola does, in fact, appreciate differences in culture, and she enjoys learning about and experiencing new ways of life. Diversity is one of the factors of the U.S. that was appealing to

her. “I actually like this country. I love the fact that I can see people from everywhere here. Like, I love that. I like meeting new people.”

After graduation, Nola hopes to obtain a career within the U.S. and get a work visa; however, if this plan does not prove to be viable her second option is to return to Venezuela, which she would be happy to do because she would be able to reunite with her beloved family. In general, Nola’s personal experience as an international student in the Midwestern U.S. was typical in that she experienced stress due to her accent and difficulties keeping up with schoolwork along with a multitude of other responsibilities. However, her experience was also unique in that she was able to retain some of her Venezuelan friends while separating herself from others, while simultaneously forming a strong social network with host nationals. Nola believes that she is a part of both social spheres.

Wow, my identity. I don’t know (pause) I mean I’m Venezuelan and I’m always going to be. That’s not gonna change, but I wanna be here [U.S.]. If I get a job I will probably stay here. I feel like I fit in both [social groups]. I don’t feel left out in any of those. I was just thinking, yeah, I mean I just feel comfortable.

Cross-Case Findings: Themes Evident Among Cases

The previous section explicated upon the details of each participant’s individual lived experience as he or she acculturated within a new sociocultural environment as an international student from Venezuela, highlighting their unique personal characteristics, struggles, coping mechanisms, and future aspirations. However, since this study contains six distinct cases, the analysis must extend across all cases to generate themes, or lessons learned. The data gathered and analyzed from the participant interviews, researcher diary, field notes, and contact summary sheets reveal seven main themes, which portray how this group of international students

experienced the process of acculturation in the Midwestern U.S. In this section, the seven emergent themes are illustrated through excerpts taken from the individual interviews to reveal the voices of the participants. This section aims to depict a sincere representation of the essence of the acculturative experience of these student participants. The seven themes include: 1) negativity towards Venezuela’s political situation 2) belief in the American dream 3) high human capital leads to less acculturative stress 4) English language and new sociocultural behaviors as common stressors 5) forming a “pseudo” family as a common coping mechanism 6) possession of “Venezuelan” and “American” behaviors, and 7) social mobility from co-national to host national social group. These seven themes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Main Themes Evident in Cross-Case Findings

Push/Pull Factors of Acculturation	Acculturative Stress and Coping	Social Identity/Mobility
Negativity towards Venezuela’s political situation	High human capital leads to less acculturative stress	Possession of “Venezuelan” and “American” behaviors
Belief in the American Dream	The English language and sociocultural behaviors as common stressors	Social mobility from co-national to host national social group
	Forming a “pseudo” family as a common coping mechanism	

Negativity Towards Venezuela’s Political Situation. As each of the participants were sharing their firsthand accounts about their experiences as international students in the Midwestern U.S., they all shared negative perceptions regarding the sociopolitical climate of their home country. The first negative perception revolved around the idea that Venezuela is not a safe environment, and this lack of security pushed these students to seek a higher education elsewhere. Ivan shared both his perspective and statistics regarding the dangers lurking in his home country:

Venezuela is the kind of place that – it's just Venezuela is just unpredictable. And that involves the population as well. Um, like just yesterday, my parents got mugged. Right in the middle of the street at 11 a.m. They [the criminals] took their cell phones and their wedding rings, right there. Um, luckily that's all that happened. Usually someone gets hurt, someone gets shot or someone gets killed. Ok, a little statistic here. Last year, during 2011 there were in Caracas, there was a total of 17,500 homicides. That is around I think, 48 or 49 homicides per day. That's the city I'm from. I mean I had friends in high school getting kidnapped. I had, uh, friends getting gun pointed.

Anita, who is the most recent participant to sojourn to the U.S., stated the fear she experienced due to insecurity in Venezuela: "I was afraid. Like I was afraid of what could happen to me or to my family." However, she described how her decision to study in the U.S. provided a welcome change: "Like I feel like I can go out and nothing would happen to me," and "I think it's [U.S.] very secure. That I'm safe."

Ana echoed this idea that the host country offers a safer setting, and safety was a main factor that influenced her decision to study abroad.

We don't have that sense of security back in Venezuela. So that kind of impressed me, like the first time I was here. So I got already in mind, like I was gonna be secure here. I was gonna be safe! Like, that was one of the top things I wanted, that I was looking for. I know I'm gonna be safer, I'm not gonna have to worry about going out at night.

David compared the crime rates in the U.S. and Venezuela to both illustrate how violent acts occur more frequently in his home country and to justify his decision to study abroad.

And, you know how safe it [U.S.] is. A lot of people consider places [in U.S.] to be unsafe because they kill or rob, like 15 people in a month. And you know, in my city,

they kill 53 people a week. So at the end of the week, 53 people on average are killed. So you know, when you compare it, you know having 15 people robbed every week, month, compare that to 53 people actually being killed in a week, I mean its quite a difference.

Leo does not specifically say that his home country is unsafe, but he alludes to it when he speaks of the political situation in Venezuela as being a setting ripe for potential social discontent and violence. “I don’t really know. I’m not sure; it could be a civil war. And the opposition [...] could get a movement going on or something. Could be a lot of rallies or it could be bad.”

Leo’s negative perception of the political climate in Venezuela is also evident among several other participants, and these participants all claim that the political sphere in their home country plays a role in where they plan to live and work in the future. Leo elaborates upon how his future is intertwined with the political situation in Venezuela:

I have two plans. Going back to Venezuela or stay here. Take over my family business or stay here and get a full time job with a company. It depends on the political situation that is going on in Venezuela. My president has cancer, so I don’t know if he’s gonna die, what’s gonna happen. But as I said, it all goes back to my – back to the political situation. It [the future] depends on that.

Anita strongly voices her opinion that the federal government in Venezuela is unstable, that her country’s future, as well as her own, is unpredictable because Chávez, the president of her country, is “bad.” “And right now in my country there is no future. No. Because of the president. He’s too (lowers voice) bad. So there’s no future for my country right now.” When discussing her own future she shares: “If the president that is actual [current] wins again, I’m

staying here for work, and if not I'm going back home. If the president changes I'm definitely going back there [Venezuela].”

David, Nola and Ivan also allude to the idea that President Chávez and the current political climate are the reasons that Venezuela is unsafe, and they claim that this lack of safety is a factor that influenced them seek their higher education, and perhaps a future career, in the U.S. Like Anita, Ana admits that her uncertainty regarding if she will remain in the U.S. post graduation depends on the political situation in Venezuela. However, Ana blatantly puts President Chávez and the hatred between political parties at fault for the current insecurity and ill feelings occurring within the Venezuelan population.

Before Chávez went into like, the government and everything, we didn't have that sense of hate. And now, well it has (quietly) changed a little bit. Um, because we have these two things, like the government, the ones that are a party for the government, you know, and the ones that are against it. And the President is like, telling the people that are with him, 'You know they [other political party] are bad,' and everything. And he's separating families and everything because of that. People say, 'You are for Chávez, don't talk to me,' or 'You are against Chávez, don't talk to me,' and it's like, really? Like, we [Venezuelans] were so good to each other. We try not to bring the political things [into conversation], if you want to uh, be very good with each other, better leave the political alone.

Thus, the participants all shared the negative perception that their home country contains insecurity and ill feelings due to the political situation in Venezuela, although some voiced this idea more strongly than others. These negative perceptions of the home country are driving forces that influenced these participants' decisions to both study abroad and perhaps remain in

the U.S. to establish a career versus returning to the unstable sociopolitical climate in Venezuela. Furthermore, all participants referred to the U.S. as a land of various advantageous resources.

Belief in the American Dream. Each of the participants expressed sentiments regarding both admiration for and appreciation towards the U.S. These international students felt that their study abroad experience at a Midwestern U.S. university was more than just a time period of travel and engagement with a new culture, rather they viewed their sojourn to the U.S. as an opportunity to grow academically, achieve work related connections via social networks and gain personal growth. In essence, these participants' words reflected a firm belief in the "American dream," because they perceived America to be place where both professional and personal success is within reach.

Ivan explained that various "networking opportunities" with Americans have allowed him to obtain internships that will be beneficial and constructive to his future career. He admits that making a comfortable living is one of the goals he feels he can attain if he remains in the U.S.

I wanna have my, a good solid job where I can like, settle into it and be happy with it. I mean America is the land of opportunity, and (pause) money, networking, it's all the whole you know? I want to be able to have the, the purchasing power in order to you know, have my own family and stuff like that.

David expressed that he was incredibly impressed with the plethora of tools and resources available to U.S. university students. He believed that such resources act as the key to success for a scholar in the university setting:

You [Americans] have all the different resources that the university provides you with. I mean, computer labs with all the different softwares you need, you know, to get your

work done. You have tutors; you got professors that are really there to help you. Um, you have study rooms, you have the library which is a great resource, printers everywhere for you to print what you need. Because of that, you – you're set to success.

Beyond offering professional development in the fields of academia and employment, the sojourn to the U.S. also allowed personal growth to take place. Towards the beginning of his interview, Leo shared that to him, the U.S. was “more of a wonderland, the land of dreams. American dream.” Later, Leo elaborated upon his idea of the “American Dream” by explaining how the U.S. offers a variety of campus groups that present the occasion for personal improvement:

Here [U.S.] it's [life] a lot better. You have the opportunity to get involved with a lot of different organizations, fraternities, sororities, sports, uh, student government, those kind of stuff. That helps with your personal growth. These colleges, in the U.S., it's like when you're in college you have to take care of your classes but you also have to build up your resume, and you have to do community service. More opportunities, definitely.

Ana also illustrated that she feels her time in the U.S. has helped her in a personal way because she has gained self-confidence as an international student:

I've grown more confident in myself. That's helped me a lot. Like being by myself and everything. Like I have to deal with my own problems. Like I don't have my mom or my dad to deal with uh, with my things. But yeah, I have grown more confident and more secure in myself. Now I'm willing to actually communicate with people that I like, never thought of doing.

Similarly, Nola believes that the more autonomous nature displayed by Americans has pushed her to become a more independent individual: “Well, I don't know if that was the U.S. or

that was the fact that I'm without my family, but I learned how to be independent. As I said, I don't know if it's the U.S., and people are sort of independent here, or maybe that helped me to do it [become independent] faster.”

Therefore, the participants in this study felt that the experience of being an international student in a Midwestern U.S. university allowed them to establish imperative professional social networks with individuals, groups and organizations as well as cultivate personal growth such as increased self-confidence and newfound independence. Thus, these students possessed the American dream mindset since they believed that in the U.S., one can succeed in all areas of life because America offers social relationships, resources, and the opportunity for personal development that make achieving one's goals a reality. However, it was knowledge and past experience with the host country that played a role regarding connections with certain social groups and levels of acculturative stress.

High Human Capital leads to Less Acculturative Stress. Although all participants had previous experiences within the U.S. before becoming international university students, the participants who had more in-depth prior experiences, meaning experiences including more immersion in the host culture and opportunities to communicate with the host nationals, possessed stronger English skills and a deeper knowledge of the American culture when they arrived on campus. Therefore, the international students who studied abroad as exchange students were more comfortable socializing with Americans and promptly formed a social network with host nationals which led them to encounter less stress compared to those international students from Venezuela whose previous experiences in the U.S. were limited to vacations.

Leo describes his experience as an exchange student in the U.S: “Uh, the system in Venezuela is like, you have eleven years of school, so I graduated from Venezuela and came here as a foreign exchange student and I did a senior year here.” Leo goes to elaborate how this experience, although “tough” at first, was beneficial for him as an international university student.

Uh, when I was in [the Midwestern high school], they do not have a lot of minority students. So I came here, it was tough for me. I didn’t know English that well, they [American students] use a lot of slang words, they have a different way to talk. They said, ‘Hey dude,’ and I was like, what’s dude? That was really different. That was really frustrating and I had to push myself to learn how to talk. So my situation was, you have to learn English if you want to survive, so I had to do it. That pushed me to start over, trying to get me to meet the slang words and all that stuff, the kind of way people talk and stuff. It took a lot of time but in the end, I succeeded. When I visited [Midwestern university] I liked it, so I thought, high school was a little tough, but its like college is gonna be better because I already know everything.

Indeed, when Leo arrived on the campus of the Midwest university, he had no trouble interacting with host nationals and joined a fraternity, and this organization gave him a strong sense of belonging. “When I came to college, I joined a fraternity and they gave me all kinds of resources to be part of a brotherhood. And that’s how I feel with these people. They are more than my friends, they are my family.” Since arriving on campus and over the past two years, Leo happily admits that the language barriers he experienced as a high school exchange student are “not a barrier at all. [...] But there’s nothing I don’t feel capable of, like when I’m talking or something.” He also admits that although he has acquaintances that are international students

from Venezuela, Leo prefers to spend most of his time with Americans because he claims he needs an atmosphere in which he can engage in the dominant culture: “But, like I really feel like I really have to be in an American environment to live this experience at a hundred percent.”

Similarly, Ivan spent his senior year as a high school exchange student in the U.S., and “then after two months here, I already wanted to stay.” Ivan had taken extensive private English lessons at a young age; thus, due to this prior knowledge of the English language he was able to communicate eloquently without an accent so he did not experience any language barriers in high school or at the university level as an international student. “It’s hard for me to explain sometimes that I am an international student when I introduce myself because I don’t sound, you know, foreign.”

Ivan’s past experience as a high school exchange student was also beneficial for him because it allowed him to form a bond with the host national social network at the Midwestern university right away since his first college roommate was an American friend he had made in high school during his initial journey abroad.

Uh, well I got here in 2010. Um, you know, I mean when I got here I only knew one person. It was my roommate. My roommate was from [town in the Midwest] and we were really good friends. He was an American and we lived in an international house on campus. And during my first semester I rushed a fraternity. [...] And now I like live in a house full of Americans, in my fraternity house.

Unlike Leo and Ivan, the other four participants had only experienced the U.S. at a more superficial level since they traveled to the South a few times a year for vacations to visit extended family. The majority of these participants stated that their trips consisted of small,

isolated incidents with Americans. For David, such trips were “fun times. We’re just buying a lot of stuff and going shopping every day.”

These vacations produced low anxiety because these participants were surrounded by family members and were able to talk to them in Spanish. However, upon arriving to the U.S. as international university students, these participants were separated from family members and became immersed in the dominant culture and language. During his first weeks in the U.S., David felt “I couldn’t relate myself to my roommates or my roommate’s friends or the people I met in the dorms.” Therefore he experienced social isolation. David also admitted that he did not understand various meanings of certain American words, which was frustrating for him.

I was probably fluent, but the things I said wasn’t taken the right way. Just because of the way I put words together. Uh, for example, me saying that’s lame instead of that’s silly. So, if I say that’s lame, people used to get offended saying like, ‘You’re calling me lame? That’s not funny,’ or whatever. Then they realized I wasn’t meaning lame, but silly. It was quite challenging to, you know, say what I wanted to say and have the impact I wanted it to have.

The three females in the study, Nola, Ana and Anita had previously vacationed in the U.S., and every one of them expressed anxiety over the English language when they first arrived as international students in the host country because they feared that they would be judged by their peers if they spoke with an accent or did not speak fluently. Ana clearly illustrated this fear that all of the females shared:

Uh, the thing comes when like, you have to talk and everything, you know? It’s like, you [Americans] detect the accent, and it’s like, ‘Where are you from?’ So we [Venezuelans] have this, like prejudice or something, like they’re [Americans] gonna treat us different if

they know that we aren't from here. So, you know, you are kind of skeptical or something, being around other people, at least Americans. I had this fear inside. I dunno, not being able to communicate as well. I feel kind of afraid sometimes.

It is evident that the participants who were able to immerse themselves in the U.S. host culture and practice the English language for an extended time were better able to form social bonds with host nationals as university students. Participants who were high school foreign exchange students were also less likely to experience stresses related to social isolation or language differences.

English Language and New Sociocultural Behaviors as Common Stressors. Although all of the participants had studied the English language while attending school in Venezuela, several of them experienced severe anxiety when acculturating to life in a social setting where English was the dominant language spoken. Ana articulated that when she began her internship experience she was faced with a totally English speaking work environment.

So, at first it was weird trying to get used to the language and everything, to a totally new environment. You have to (pause) you are in their country! You have to deal with them [Americans]. And I learned that um, when I was doing my first co-op, you know, it's in an all American environment. So, yes it was all English, every day, every time. I had this fear inside. Not being able to communicate.

Likewise, Anita stated:

Well, it's difficult because sometimes I don't understand everything that they [Americans] say. Because its too fast or there are words that I don't understand. Because like, I'm learning, I'm still learning English, and it's hard but I try. Yeah, and the first

thing I say is like, don't make fun of me because I'm learning. I might do some mistakes sometimes.

David explained that his difficulty with the English language caused him to feel socially isolated from his American peers:

Because sometimes you, you feel judged here and uh, sometimes people doesn't wanna team up with you because of the language barriers. So, if it's an English class, no one wants to be with 'the guy who doesn't speak English.' You know, so you feel kind of put aside and out of place. You kind of feel like you don't belong here and you shouldn't be here.

Nola also expressed her fear of others judging her accent; "I didn't consider myself bilingual when I first came here. [...] And I was like, what if they find out I'm not from here? What if they think I'm a retard because I'm talking like this [with an accent]? I'm self-conscious about my accent." Leo also felt frustrated by his accent because even though he can speak the English language very well, he feels stress when others have difficulty understanding him.

Definitely my accent when people don't understand what I'm saying. It's really annoying. But with my accent and the way I talk, it's different because I really wanna try all kinds of ways (pause). I try to hang only with the people who can teach me to speak [English] pretty well and that's something I cannot get rid of. So like, that's really hard. It really, really frustrates me when somebody cannot understand and I do not get mad at them at all. It's just something I cannot change about myself and I have to accept it and live with it because that's part of the person that I am.

Not only did the majority of the participants feel stress related to the English language during their acculturation experience in the Midwestern U.S., they also had difficulty learning

and practicing the proper social behaviors of the host culture. The participants shared that Americans were not as “warm” or physically affectionate, as Venezuelans are with friends and family, making interpersonal interactions a complex adjustment. Ana explained this difference:

We [Venezuelan international students] need some time; we need that, you know, that warm that we used to have back in Venezuela. Cause it’s different now, it’s not that you don’t have it [affection] here; it’s a different kind of (pause) treatment. And the way we are, for example, we meet a person we hug them, we’re used to that. We kiss on the cheek. Now we don’t have that.

Nola echoed this confusion regarding social behavior because when she first arrived in the U.S. because she learned “the hard way” that interpersonal interactions with Americans occur in a manner that differs from what she is used to in her home country.

Well, actually in the beginning it was kind of hard because, I don’t know how to say it. We [Venezuelans] are very warm, we’re very touchy, you know? And that’s normal for us. We – actually every time we say hi to someone is with a kiss on the cheek. Or like a hug or something. So in the beginning it was hard [in the U.S.] to say hi to someone, um and not touching someone. It was hard. I still do it, every once in awhile. And I’m like you shouldn’t do that! You’re gonna get in trouble! But yeah, I had to learn the hard way for sure.

Leo expressed the following sentiment concerning the social behaviors of Americans and Venezuelans:

It’s kind of different when you interact with people in Venezuela. People in Venezuela are usually more talkative, usually more happy all the time. They wanna make conversations sometimes. But you – you meet somebody [in the U.S.] and they’re like

‘Hey, how’s it going?’ and they continue walking away. For example, In Venezuela you make a lot of physical contact with the other person as soon as you get to know them.

Here of course like, you meet somebody and it’s really formal. So like, here it’s different.

The majority of the participants experienced stress when attempting to communicate in English to host nationals, and some of them feared harsh judgments from their peers. Due to these communication difficulties, some participants felt isolated from the dominant culture and a number of these international students felt frustration when adjusting to social behaviors that were so dissimilar from their own. However, the participants utilized a coping mechanism that allowed them to deal with the anxieties they felt in the host country.

Forming a “Pseudo” Family as a Common Coping Mechanism. During the acculturation process as the participants were immersed in the language and sociocultural environment of the host culture, all participants experienced some sort of stress, with the most common stressors relating to the language barrier and social differences. However, each participant was able to cope with the various stresses they were experiencing by forming a sort of “pseudo” family in the U.S. Whether this family consisted of fellow Venezuelan international students, a group of South Americans or a fraternity containing mainly American peers, all participants were able to join a social group that provided them with security, a sense of belonging and often alleviated stressors prominent in the new culture.

Ivan illustrated that joining his fraternity on campus allowed him to ease the stress of “finding a job” because this organization provided him with wonderful possibilities, “And during my first semester I rushed a fraternity, which I’m part of right now and that has allowed me to expand on things that I do on campus. It got me a job. Um, it got me a really good internship. It’s really opened many different opportunities.”

Anita spoke about how the South American and Venezuelan social groups are her family in the States because they share a similar language and culture, which lessens her stress related to the new host culture.

I was alone here, but then I knew some people from Venezuela [who are now in the U.S.] and we were, made this strong relationship and we're still friends. We do everything together because we're like a family here. This is like my second family. Because they are just like me. And they are not just Venezuelans; they are from Chile and Columbia. I feel like I am home, cause they're exactly like me. They talk in my language, they know my culture. It's comfortable to be with them.

Similarly, Ana revealed that she too feels a strong connection with the aforementioned Venezuelan and South American social groups because interacting with them allows her to engage in the language she is familiar with:

When I came here [U.S.] there were other Venezuelans, and we as fellow Venezuelans know how bad it is to come to another country and live on your own. So, I had these guys and they helped me a lot, like a lot. Trying to make me feel comfortable. Oh, I love 'em. It's like, we have grown to a big family, you know? Like, as Venezuelans, because we are kind of a group, as a culture, we try to help each other as much as we can. And now it's not only with other Venezuelans, it's like South Americans in general. We have um, four Columbians and two Chileans. We try to (pause) its like a getaway from everything where we are living. Sometimes its like, you can't express what you feel to other people, but to the people you talk to in your same language. It's liberating to do that.

Although David feels that he is comfortable and welcome in two groups (host nationals and co-nationals), he views Venezuelans as a family and his relationship with Americans as a

friendship. Since David struggled at the beginning of his sojourn with social isolation from the dominant culture, his South American pseudo family allowed him to feel as if he was home.

I like spending time with both [social groups]. As I said, whenever I'm with the South Americans I feel at home, but I've also got to feel really, really comfortable around Americans. Which is incredible to me. I always feel attached to the Venezuelans. I feel the family bond with the Venezuelans, with the South Americans. But with my American friends it is more like a genuine friendship.

Leo admitted that he feels the family connection with both Americans and Venezuelans for different but important reasons. He feels that he has established social ties with Venezuelans because of the common values that they share; yet he feels connected to members of his American fraternity because they share the bond of brotherhood and the fraternity as a social organization offers opportunities necessary to establish a successful future in the U.S.

I joined a fraternity, and they gave me all kinds of resources to be part of a brotherhood. And that's how I feel with all of these people. They are more than my friends. They are my family. They are my family here and it's different from everybody else. Like I have friends here, but these guys are my family. I came here [U.S.] to study abroad. I left my family, my friends in order to speak English and to get involved to maybe get a job after college and I needed an American environment. Eh, I love all the Venezuelans here. They are my family. They are like my second family, they really are. My fraternity's also a family... but I spend more time with Americans because I left Venezuela, as I said, I left my friends and everything, and if I would want to speak Spanish and have Venezuelan parties all the time I will still be in Venezuela. But, I really feel like I really have to be in an American environment to live this experience at a hundred percent.

The participants in this study cope with various stresses by forming a pseudo family, or an intimate social network with one or more social groups. These networks provide opportunities, security, and a sense of “home” for various participants. However, regardless of which social group a participant considers “family,” he or she must be aware and willing to adjust their social behaviors in accordance with the dominant social practices of a particular context.

Possession of “Venezuelan” and “American” Behaviors. As the participants recounted the stories of their acculturation as international students in the Midwestern U.S., some participants elaborated upon how they felt that they possessed two sets of behaviors, Venezuelan social behaviors and the behaviors accepted by the host culture. Therefore, depending on the social context, be it in a classroom with host nationals or within one’s apartment with co-nationals, a participant may have to shift the way they are behaving.

David elaborated on how he feels relating to this issue:

Sometimes, it depends, you know, on the context of the – of the situation. I’m more shy in some, uh, so for example in a school related environment. It’s quite challenging when it’s school related. Not challenging, but I’m a little more shy. And the reason why is, it’s because again, you kinda get the feeling (pause). At school, sometimes you feel, you know, kind of neglected. Not neglected, or, you know, put aside, a little bit.

On the other hand, when David is “at a party” or “at lunch” with fellow Venezuelan international students, he feels “you are truly yourself” without the fear of being judged or neglected because “I have all the culture, all the language, all the struggles, all the homesickness issues in common with the Venezuelans, which makes our friendships, you know, instant and to

be strong.” To David, feeling comfortable with Venezuelans is like a “switch” that turns on and happens instantaneously.

Ana also referred to different social situations in which she and her Venezuelan cohorts change the way they are interacting or the language they are speaking when a member of the host culture is present. She too labeled this rapid change as an internal “switch.”

We [Venezuelans] have to be aware of it [behavior]. You have to be careful with it, because sometimes people don't get it the right way. We speak Spanish when we are together. Yeah, we don't have to make that effort. It's not like we care of making that effort, like 'Ah! The Americans are coming (laughs) and we have to speak English!' No! We have this switch, like, there's an American. And you start speaking English, and we don't care. We don't care at all now. You know you are gonna have to deal with it [encountering Americans] at some point.

Leo took this idea of switching one's behavior in various social contexts with different social groups to a whole new level when he described that when he is within the United States, he only associates with Americans, ergo he adopted and utilized the mannerisms, slang, and behaviors deemed appropriate by the host culture. Conversely, when in Venezuela he feels he can be his “Venezuelan self” and participate fully in that culture.

I know it sounds a little crazy, but I consider that I have two (pause) that I am a different person when I'm here and a different person when I'm in Venezuela. So, like when I come here I cut all contact with Venezuelans. But I go back to Venezuela twice a year, like every year, so when I go back I'm only with them and I don't talk to anybody here. So like, that's why I'm kind of like two different persons, two different people. Two groups, two identities. When I'm here I talk to my friends from America and when I'm

back in Venezuela I just talk to them [Venezuelans]. Because when I'm in Venezuela, it's my time to be Venezuelan again.

Leo expressed that he behaves as the "American [Leo]" in the context of the U.S. and "Venezuelan [Leo]" when he visits his home country because he believes "You cannot be part of two cultures in a specific environment. That's my opinion."

The participant voices in this section highlight how an individual possesses the power to modify his or her behavior in a particular social context; however, several of the participants agreed that another important, if not the most imperative shift or change that a member of the non-dominant social group can utilize during acculturation is the ability to move between social groups.

Social Mobility from Co-national to Host National Social Group. Several participants expressed how they willingly marginalized themselves from the co-national social group during their sojourn abroad because they perceived another social group (in most cases the dominant, host national social group), to be more favorable since membership to this social network created opportunities to better comprehend the host culture and language. Leo explained why he chose to interact with people "out of that circle" of Venezuelan international students.

Because I came here to study abroad. I left my family, I left my friends, and everything in order to speak English, to get involved, to maybe get a job after college, and I needed an American environment. Eh, I love the Venezuelans here. [...] But I spend more time with Americans because I left Venezuela, as I said, I left my friends and everything, and if I would want to speak Spanish and have Venezuelan parties all the time, I will still be in Venezuela.

Due to his prior experience as a high school exchange student and his private English lessons as a child, Ivan felt connected to the host national social group before arriving on campus. He knew that in order to become accepted by the dominant culture he had to distance himself from the Venezuelan international student social network, which he viewed as a tight knit group. He believes that this distancing from the co-national group allowed him to have a “better experience.”

The way I live I spend more time with Americans than with Venezuelans. Let me see, how can I explain this without sounding a little bit rude, uh, towards the Venezuelans. Um, when I got here I realized that Venezuelans, all the Venezuelans were always hanging out with each other. They were always together; they're always in the same circle, day and night, all the time. And I knew that if I wanted to become what I am today, that was gonna be a problem. So, at the beginning when I needed them they were great. They helped me out, they helped me establish those first few weeks, then after that I said thank you very much but I'm gonna try and make my own friends and make my own name in this university. So I started expanding on my own. I started getting involved with other organizations, people on campus, so by doing so I found myself, you know, like I live in a house full of Americans in my fraternity house.

Similarly, Nola felt the urge to break away from many of the co-nationals that had been welcoming to her when she first arrived in the U.S. She described that although she remains close to certain members of the co-national group, some of the friendships she forged within that group were insincere.

Well, in the beginning when it was just a few of us [Venezuelan international students], it was nice. It was just like having a piece of home every once in a while. Um, then we

grew a little bit. Then (casts eyes downward) when we grew a lot, it started getting a little bit uncomfortable because – you felt that they were being friends with you just because you were Venezuelan, so they have to be your friend by default, you know? They really don't like you; it's just that you are Venezuelan so they have to be friends with you. So, I'm sticking with the ones [Venezuelan students] that I actually know that are my friends.

After separating herself from some of the other international students from Venezuela, Nola felt liberated to explore new social groups, particularly the American social group, and this choice proved to be beneficial. "I found a few friends like [American friend]. I told him, you need to tell me like, every time I'm saying something wrong. He's like, 'Okay, I'll correct you.' And I'm like okay. So he still does it (smiles) and uh, that helped me a lot actually."

David echoed the idea that an instant, seemingly inevitable connection between himself and fellow co-national students exists primarily because they share a national heritage and the international student experience as well. Like Nola, David also believed that the friendships formed with American peers take more time and feel more genuine.

It's like an instant switch, we're [Venezuelan international students] friends now. But with Americans, it is more like something you work through. Something that doesn't happen just like this (snaps fingers). So yeah, I have all the culture, all the language, all the struggles, all the money issues, all the homesickness issues in common with the Venezuelans, which makes out friendships, you know, instant and to be strong friendships right away. But with my American friends, I had to meet them first and understand what we got in common and understand everything. I thought, we've got this in common, we've got that in common and it's something that is like, naturally flows but you need to work through it. It's not like it's a switch like the Venezuelans are.

David explained that he decided to reach out and meet host national students by joining a variety of organizations and groups, and by doing so he was able to form a social network with Americans. This network and the friendships within it allowed David to practice his English skills and to observe and practice various socially acceptable behaviors. He stated, “I understand the culture a lot, a lot better.” For example, he described how it was common to speak very loudly at a bank in his home country, but he has since changed this practice due to spending time with American friends.

At the bank, I used to speak really loudly; in our country people are loud. But here [U.S.] first you understand that you’re loud, then you understand that it’s wrong to be loud. And then you change the way you, you know. So I see how differently I behaved compared to them [Americans].

These participants truly felt that opportunities to learn about and become accustomed to the host culture would become more accessible to them if they distanced themselves from the co-national group, and in fact, this was the case. By distancing themselves from co-nationals through social mobility and being able to spend time among and form social ties with the dominant social group, these participants were able to practice the English language and both observe and perform cultural practices; thereby allowing themselves to integrate further into the host society.

Summary

This chapter provided the overall findings and major themes evident within and across cases. The first section revealed an in-depth description of each individual case to illustrate the lived experience of every participant including demographic information and personal characteristics, and the acculturative stresses and coping strategies utilized were expanded upon

as well. These individual profiles were described in detail to portray an accurate depiction of each participant's acculturation experience in the Midwestern U.S. The second section of this chapter highlighted the seven main themes that were evident across all cases. These themes explored the participants' negative perceptions of the home country and how this factor pushed these students to migrate abroad to obtain a higher education and perhaps establish a career, and this section also explained how all participants believed America benefitted them in both professional and personal ways. This section also highlighted how the prior knowledge of the English language and past experiences with the U.S. host culture were able to influence certain participants to associate on a deeper level with the host national social group. The subsequent themes examined how all participants suffered stresses related to new social behaviors and language difficulties and that these issues were controlled through the formation of a pseudo family, or a social group that provides a sense of belonging and safety in the host country. Also, participants described their possession of sets of social behaviors that were either "American" or "Venezuelan" and how these behaviors were utilized in different social situations. Finally, self-marginalization and social behaviors were discussed to demonstrate how these international students were able to distance themselves from the co-national social group in order to join a more desirable social group if they preferred to do so. The seven aforementioned imperative themes will be expanded upon in greater detail and applied to the literature in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the data findings revealed in the previous chapter will be further analyzed within the context of the literature on acculturation and social identity. Since this study intends to investigate and comprehend the lived experiences of six international students from Venezuela as they acculturate within the context of a university in the Midwestern United States, this chapter explores and discusses how the acculturation processes of these international students affects their stress levels, coping strategies, and social identities. The personal acculturative processes of these international students are explored and reveal that all participants experienced some degree of acculturative stress due to the stressors discussed in the literature, mainly difficulty with the English language, difficulty practicing new cultural behaviors, and discrimination or judgment from the host society. Additionally, this chapter discusses the social characteristics of the participants by revealing how they utilized the retention and formulation of social identities with co-national and host national social groups in order to achieve a sense of security and belonging, which can lead to less acculturative stress. Psychological characteristics are also illuminated and reveal that participants with more prior experience in and knowledge of the host culture experience lower acculturative stress levels. Also, this chapter explicates that all participants belonged to a social network and established social identities with certain social groups depending upon which acculturation strategy was utilized. It is also explained that some participants regarded a social group as “salient” if it allowed them to feel a sense of belonging and aligned with their goals. Finally, participants practicing the acculturation strategies of integration or assimilation chose to either psychologically move from a lower to a higher status social group, or to move between social groups by possessing a social identity for each group.

The Acculturation Process: Acculturation Strategies, Stress, and Coping

The participants in this study were subjected to the process of acculturation because each of them experienced what Berry (1988; 1990; 2005) described as individual changes that result from continuous, firsthand contact with a distinct sociocultural group that differed from their own. These Venezuelan international students were studying in a host social environment in the Midwestern U.S. that was dissimilar to their own social context due to differences in language, social behaviors, and cultural norms. In order to handle these differences, the participants in this study, like all acculturating individuals, utilized an acculturation strategy. Berry (2005) argues that individuals face acculturation by forming a distinction between one's orientation towards and association with his or her own sociocultural group and his or her association with a new sociocultural group. The findings in this study found that all participants exhibited one of Berry's (1988; 1990; 2005; et al., 2011) four acculturation strategies (integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization) because they either chose to associate and form social networks with host nationals, co-nationals, or both. However, it is at this point that the notion of "assimilation" should be addressed in greater detail. Over time, the term "assimilation" developed a negative connotation, especially due to its strong association with imperialism and the total conquering of non-dominant populations. However, the kind of assimilation that two of my participants are displaying is more so a position of cultural adaptation and a higher degree of Berry's integration component. The aspects of acculturation can be seen on a continuum from assimilation to integration in this study, and some of my participants (Leo and Ivan) are more able and willing to selectively adapt to their new environment as they feel necessary due to their past experiences in the U.S. and their possession of high amounts of human capital.

The social bonds these participants formed (or social capital), along with their social behaviors, human capital and future aspirations were all displayed in the findings and revealed that David, Ana and Nola utilized the acculturation strategy of integration, while Anita employed separation and Leo and Ivan were the most assimilated into the host culture. These aforementioned factors (social capital, human capital, social behaviors) present in each participant's acculturation experience are part of the social and psychological characteristics that are influential to the acculturation strategy utilized and the amount of stress experienced by an acculturating individual. These characteristics and the acculturation strategies of each participant will be expanded upon in the following sections.

Social Characteristics. Participants in this study established social networks or social capital (Coleman, 1988) with co-national peers, host national peers or both groups of peers. According to the findings of this study, forming such a network with fellow international students from Venezuela proved to be a rather effortless task in that the members of this group share a culture and language, which is similar to the data provided by Li et al (2007) and Halic et al (2009), which state that Latino students are “naturally close” and desire to spend time with their fellow international students because they share a common heritage, language and the struggles associated with acculturation. David shared how easily he bonded with co-nationals: “So yeah, I have all the culture, all the language, all the struggles, all the money issues, all the homesickness issues in common with the Venezuelans, which makes out friendships, you know, instant and to be strong friendships right away.”

Ana described how she tends to associate with co-nationals in the new sociocultural setting because they feel like her family away from home since she is able to speak Spanish with them.

So, I had these guys [co-national students] and they helped me a lot, like a lot. Trying to make me feel comfortable. Oh, I love ‘em. It’s like, we have grown to a big family, you know? Like, as Venezuelans, because we are kind of a group, as a culture, we try to help each other as much as we can. [...] Sometimes its like, you can’t express what you feel to other people, but to the people you talk to in your same language. It’s liberating to do that.

Similarly, Nola stated that she still communicates with of her co-nationals and feels a bond with them “especially because they are from my country,” but she claims that this bond exists because of the fact that they share a culture rather than a genuine friendship. So, although Nola still has social ties with some Venezuelan international students, she is “sticking with the ones that I actually know that are my friends. The way I see it is if I met them back home I would have been their friend.” However, David, Ana and Nola also have social ties with host nationals; therefore they utilize integration (as illustrated below) because Berry (1988; 1990; 2005; et al., 2011) defines integration as the strategy used by individuals who seek to maintain relationships with co-nationals and the host culture.

The more acculturation experiences an individual has within the host culture, the greater the degree to which one participates in and is better able to adapt to that dominant culture (Berry et al., 1987; Berry, 2005). Meaning, that if an individual is involved in organizations or activities that place him/her among host nationals, that individual will experience a less stressful acculturation process because he or she is able to observe and replicate appropriate use of the native language and social behaviors. David, Ana and Nola each had significant acculturation experiences with the host culture. David joined an engineering organization and participated in several internships with American co-workers. This allowed him to “understand the culture I was

immersed in.” Ana also experienced the American sociocultural environment by having acculturation experiences through internship opportunities and by becoming the treasurer of ISA which allowed her to meet “international students, but as well as Americans.” Similarly, Nola formed social bonds with American classmates who help her improve her English pronunciation skills. Therefore, the aforementioned examples taken from the findings illustrate that these three participants are integrated since they possess social capital with both home and host cultures.

Conversely, Anita is the only participant who claimed she is “always” with other Venezuelans and she seems to lack desire to spend time with Americans or participate in the host culture, thus illustrating her strategy of separation, which Berry (1988; 1990; 1997; 2005; et al., 2011) defines as the avoidance of interaction with the host society and culture.

When I’m in class, I’m with Americans. Yeah, but I don’t speak like, with them too much. And I – I’m always with someone from Venezuela. Always. I think that I belong to the Venezuelan group because I spend most of my time with them. Since I wake up, I’m [living] with a Venezuelan, my brother. Then I go out to classes walking with my friend and we meet another friend from Venezuela, and we walk together to classes and we wait till the other one get out of class and we (pause) walk to lunch or, yeah. We’re always together. Always.

Anita described how she feels when interacting with other Venezuelans: “Really good. Like I’m home. I feel like I am home. Cause they’re exactly like me. They talk in my language (pause) they know my culture. It’s comfortable to be with them.” Anita also communicated with her family in Venezuela every day, so she keeps direct social ties with those in the home country strong as well. However, with the exception of Anita, all other participants in the study chose to associate with American students as well.

On the other hand, both Ivan and Leo tend to associate mostly with host nationals in the U.S. social context. These two participants were immersed in host culture in their acculturation experiences since they both live in fraternity houses with American students. Leo distances himself from friends and family in Venezuela while he is studying in the U.S., “I came here to study abroad. I left my family, I left my friends, and everything in order to speak English, to get involved, to maybe get a job after college, and I needed an American environment.”

Interestingly, when Ivan refers to Americans he truly feels like he is “one of ‘em” and for an acculturating individual to feel as if he is part of the host society, he is more assimilated into that society. Besides living with Americans, both of these students are fluent in English and are comfortable with the social practices and cultural norms of the host country, which according to Berry (1990; 2005) is also a sign of assimilation. Therefore, all six participants have utilized an acculturation strategy by fitting into one or more of the three social networks (co-nationals, non-conational international students, or host nationals) developed in the functional model of friendship networks for international students (Ward et al., 2001). However, several psychological characteristics play a role in the acculturation strategies utilized and the levels of acculturative stress experienced.

Psychological Characteristics. All participants in this study displayed unique and varying levels what Berry (1990) describes as psychological variables of acculturation, which include, “prior knowledge of the new language and culture, prior intercultural encounters of any kind, motives for the contact” (p. 251). Out of all of the participants involved in this study, Ivan and Leo exhibited the most in-depth prior knowledge of and prior intercultural encounters with host nationals in the U.S. as international university students because they both spent their senior year of high school as exchange students in the United States. Due to this extended prior

experience, these two participants were able to become immersed in the host culture, practice the English language, and most importantly, form bonds within the host national social network. Leo claimed that he had so much practice speaking and understanding English due to his year as an exchange student, when he began his studies at the university in the Midwestern U.S. he felt he “knew everything” and that language was “not a barrier at all. [...] But there’s nothing I don’t feel capable of, like when I’m talking or something.”

Similarly, Ivan does not mention the language or sociocultural differences as a stressor because he stated, “Americans? I feel like one of ‘em pretty much.” Therefore, because of their prolonged intercultural encounter with the host culture in high school, Ivan and Leo were able to establish social connections with host nationals, learn about the culture, practice the language and ultimately experience less acculturative stress. The fact that these two participants perceived the adjustment to the host sociocultural environment to be simple due to the fact that they felt they were a part of the host environment is yet another example of how Ivan and Leo are more assimilated into U.S. dominant culture. Thus, the experiences of these two participants and their low stress levels reflects the findings of other research studies which state that experiencing the dominant culture firsthand improves students’ language skills (speaking and comprehending) while providing opportunities to adjust to the new culture (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Shigaki & Smith, 1997; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Zhai, 2003). The remaining four participants did not have the experience of long-term exposure to the American culture and society prior to becoming international university students; therefore, they were more intimidated by the English language and host culture and experienced greater acculturative stress levels related to language and sociocultural issues.

Berry (1990) also mentioned “motives for contact” as a psychological characteristic, and these may also be referred to as “influences” or “push and pull factors.” Push factors typically have a negative impact on an emigrating individual’s sociocultural environment, leading that individual to migrate to both avoid unfavorable conditions and to seek conditions that are constructive (Berry, 1990). The main push factor in this study was the lack of safety in the home country of Venezuela due to sociopolitical insecurity and feelings of ill will between the Chavistas and those who opposed them. All participants voiced the idea that their country is not secure; however, some more blatantly explained that the political sphere is to blame. It should also be noted that during the interview process, when questions concerning the Venezuelan government or President Chávez were mentioned, participants became visibly uncomfortable and were not prompted to elaborate on these responses. Anita stated her feelings towards life in Venezuela, “Right now in my country, there is no future. No. For (pause) because of the president. He’s too (lowers voice) bad. So, there’s no future in my country right now. These days insecurity is high. I think that we’re not safe there.”

Ana’s feelings were reflective of Anita’s as she made the following accusatory remark towards Venezuela’s federal government, and particularly President Chávez:

Before Chávez went into like, the government and everything, we didn’t have that sense of hate. And now, well it has (quietly) changed a little bit. Um, because we have these two things, like the government, the ones that are a party for the government, you know, and the ones that are against it. And the President is like, telling the people that are with him, ‘You know they [other political party] are bad,’ and everything. And he’s separating families and everything because of that. People say, ‘You are for Chávez, don’t talk to

me,’ or ‘You are against Chávez, don’t talk to me,’ and it’s like, really? Like, we [Venezuelans] were so good to each other.

The aforementioned quotes of Ana and Anita, as well as the consensus of all participants that the Venezuelan political realm is insecure and may be establishing social divisions, are reflective of data obtained by Ellner (2011), Gonzalez and Oyelere (2001), Guanipa et al., (2002), and Wheeler et al. (2001).

On the contrary, pull factors are those that have a positive impact on an individual in the new sociocultural environment (Berry, 1990). All participants seem to embrace the notion of the American Dream, yet none of them were willing to forsake or give up their cultural values or *personalismo*, feelings of good will and warmth towards others. In other words, although these students wish to obtain the American Dream and become independent and successful individuals, they also maintain their cultural markers of identity such as *personalismo* (Ramirez, 1990), collectivism, and warmth among friends and family. All six participants expressed that the U.S. had been an appealing option for them because they believed that acquiring a degree from a university in the U.S. would enhance their lives, whether through opportunities to become part of organizations or clubs, the availability of resources to succeed academically, the establishment of social networks within the workforce environment, or the ability for self-enhancement. David described his awe at the plethora of resources available to students in the U.S:

You [Americans] have all the different resources that the university provides you with. I mean, computer labs with all the different softwares you need, you know, to get your work done. You have tutors; you got professors that are really there to help you. Um, you

have study rooms, you have the library which is a great resource, printers everywhere for you to print what you need. Because of that, you – you’re set to success.

Several participants also mentioned that they believed, prior to traveling to the U.S., that their sojourn would be beneficial because it would teach them to become more independent since they would be separated from their immediate families, a finding that is consistent with the work of Obst and Forester (2012). Anita mentioned that she learned to be “more respectful” as a result of being among Americans, and other participants alluded to the fact that life in the U.S. would be beneficial for them in the long term because they had experiences which allowed them to practice organizational and time management skills. Leo explained that just as he had anticipated, his studies in the U.S. built his “character” because he learned not only to be independent, but he experienced leadership, sportsmanship, and the value of community service through his fraternity. Leo stated, “I came here [U.S.] as a boy, now I consider myself a gentleman.”

According to Berry (1990), personal goals are another component that constructs the psychological characteristics of an acculturating individual, and the future goal of remaining in the U.S. post graduation to establish a career was expressed and evident across cases in this study. Interestingly, the aforementioned push and pull factors play a role in influencing the acculturating individual’s future plans and objectives. For example, the push factor of the “unsafe” and “unpredictable” sociopolitical environment in Venezuela may be one of the primary reasons that all of the participants in the study intend to stay in the U.S. after achieving their undergraduate degrees. David, Ana and Nola all share that they desire to stay in the U.S. to look for full time jobs, but Ana would be willing to return to her home country if the current president were to be replaced. David, on the other hand does not wish to return to Venezuela and

instead hopes to “get a permanent residency status, or a green card” in the U.S. Not surprisingly, Ivan, the most assimilated participant, wants to stay in the U.S. long term and establish his career. Even Anita, who has separated herself from the dominant culture for the duration of her sojourn, claims that she plans to stay in the host country unless “the president [of Venezuela] changes.” Interestingly, even though Leo is very assimilated because he associated mostly with host nationals during his sojourn and assumed his “American [Leo]” identity, he will either remain in the U.S. or return to his country to help his family’s business and the decision “depends on the political situation that is going on in Venezuela.” So it is obvious that the various reforms made by the Venezuelan government are leading to a “brain drain” as evidenced in Guanipa et al. (2002) and Margolis (2009) since all of these participants are not planning to return home after graduation. Also, as a result of 2003’s Mission Sucre and its lack of quality instructors, the students within Sucre schools are not gaining a quality education. After these Sucre students graduate and seek to obtain jobs in the Venezuelan workforce, they are competing in the labor market with public and private university graduates and this drives salaries down. Therefore, these reforms under Mission Sucre have also pushed Venezuelan international students to remain in the U.S. after graduation.

However, the positive pull factors also play a role in the future objectives of these international students. The opportunities for academic and professional enhancement pull students to the U.S. and encourage them to remain there. David mentioned how difficult it is to “get a good job” in his home country versus the U.S. because of “how much easier it is [in the U.S.] for students to, you know, start a career in a pretty good situation.” Therefore, due to the combination of the negative push factors reflected in the difficulty of establishing a career in a home country that is deemed politically insecure, and the fact that there are academic,

professional and personal opportunities offered in the U.S., David and the five other international students from Venezuela who participated in this study stated that they plan to remain in the U.S. post graduation in order to obtain a job and secure their future.

The social and psychological characteristics mentioned all explicate the social, cultural, and motivational reasons why the six participants in this study utilized particular acculturation strategies. However, regardless of the strategy chosen, all participants experienced some degree of stress in the U.S., some to a higher degree than others.

Stress Levels. Berry (1990; 2005) states that all acculturating individuals experience stress as a result of intercultural contact, but that these stresses vary in severity since acculturative stress is an individualistic experience. The stresses endured by the international students in this study varied in both type and intensity, as evidenced by Church (1982) who stated that sojourners, as an acculturating group, often differ in the degree to which they experience certain problems. All participants experienced stressors related to the English language and social differences. Various research studies on the acculturation of international students (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Halic, et al., 2009; Li et al., 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009) have reflected that English proficiency and cultural/social differences were main factors spurring the stresses of anxiety, homesickness, and isolation.

Nola, Ana and Anita expressed anxiety related to their accents and the fact that they may sound “foreign,” which made them worry that they would be negatively judged by American peers. Nola voiced her fear, “what if they [Americans] find out I’m not from here?” In a slightly different vein, Leo was not worried about being seen as a “foreigner” but he was frustrated by “my accent when people don’t understand what I’m saying. It’s really annoying.” These pronunciation difficulties that are common to Latinos adjusting to the U.S. context are

highlighted in other qualitative studies (Halic et al., 2009; Li et al., 2007). David experienced social isolation as a result of not being fluent in the English language or understanding mainstream English slang when he arrived in the U.S., and lamented, “no one wants to be with ‘the guy who doesn’t speak English.’ You know, so you kind of feel put aside and out of place.” These issues that international students face related to English proficiency are reflected in various research studies (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Along with experiencing language difficulties, participants revealed that differences in socially acceptable behavior was difficult to adjust to in the beginning of the sojourn, and this stress is referred to by Oberg (1960) as “culture shock.” Ana, Nola, and Leo felt that American students in the Midwestern U.S. are not as “warm” or physically affectionate as peers in their home country. In Venezuela, hugging and kissing on the cheek were common practices when greeting a friend or stranger, but as Ana stated, “Now we don’t have that.” Due to these sociocultural differences, several of the participants felt disconnected from the host culture in the beginning of their sojourn. Another immense and notable difference between Venezuela and the U.S. is that American society values individualism, and as evidenced by Carballo-Diequez, (1989), Comas-Días, (1989) and Li et al. (2007), while Latinos have a close, familiar nature and prefer to practice collectivism. Ana explained, “You’re [Americans] kind of more individualist. We tend to do things in a group. We uh, probably feel more close, like familiar? Nucleo or (pause). Nuclear.” Perceived discrimination was also evident, perhaps the most by Anita because she has spent the least amount of time in the U.S. and tended to separate herself from the dominant culture. Anita described various incidents of discrimination, both within the classroom when her peers asked her if she “spoke Mexican,” to public events like the university football

game where an American told her to “go back to your country.” Several research studies on international student adjustment concur that perceived discrimination will lead to an individual feeling less comfortable in the host environment (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Halic et al., 2009; Wadsworth, 2008) as was the case with Anita. Interestingly, Ivan was the student who experienced the least amount of acculturative stress in this study. Ivan was the most assimilated to the host culture and his past experience in the U.S. as a high school exchange student along with his years of private English lessons eliminated common stressors related to language proficiency or sociocultural differences. He only worried about obtaining a “good” future job in the U.S. This finding actually contradicts research by Berry (1990; 2005) which states that individuals who pursue the acculturation strategy of integration experience less stress than those who acculturate using separation, marginalization, or assimilation. However, regardless of the types of stresses experienced, the participants dealt with these negative feelings and anxieties by forming a “pseudo” family in the U.S.

Coping Strategies Utilized. All six of the participants in this study formed a “pseudo” family with one or more social groups (either co-nationals and/or host nationals) in the host country as a way of coping with the aforementioned stresses associated with the process of acculturation. These students formed social connections with a combination of co-nationals, non-conational international students, or host nationals, and thereby illustrated the coping concept of friendship networks presented by Ward et al. (2001). This particular strategy of forming a bond with fellow co-nationals in order to preserve and practice the heritage culture and traditions is evidenced as a main coping strategy of international students (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Li et al., 2007; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). Since Anita utilized the acculturative strategy of separation from the host society, she primarily engaged in contact with

fellow co-nationals and this filled her with a sense of belonging, familiarity and allowed her the freedom to speak her own language.

However, Ivan and Leo, who became very assimilated into the U.S. society, preferred to converse with and spend the majority of their time among host nationals. Finding support in the host culture through the formation of American “buddies” is another well-known coping strategy for international students in the U.S. (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Shigaki & Smith, 1997; Tseng & Newton). The American friendship networks established by Ivan and Leo allowed them to practice the host language and participate in the culture in a more intimate way; thereby, allowing them to further adapt to the host society and experience less stress. Leo claimed that although he feels affection towards his co-nationals, he spends his time with Americans because, “I really feel like I really have to be in an American environment to live this experience at a hundred percent.” The finding that revealed that Ivan and Leo chose to associate nearly exclusively with American host nationals contrasts with other studies which have shown that Latino students prefer to spend more time with fellow Latinos during their stay in the U.S. (Halic et al., 2009; Li et al., 2007).

David, Nola and Ana are the three participants who engaged in the acculturation strategy of integration, and unlike the aforementioned students who chose to associate primarily with either the co-national or host national peer social networks, these participants developed bonds with both groups. The network, or “family” that David, Nola and Ana established with fellow Venezuelans allows them to speak their own language and essentially have the freedom to experience the culture they are comfortable with, so this co-national network eases the stresses associated with the English language and behavioral practices of host society. In the same vein, the time these three students spend in the host national social network also eases the stresses

related to English proficiency and cultural behaviors in the U.S. because relationships with Americans allow international students to develop English skills and cultural understanding by listening to and speaking the language and experiencing the culture firsthand, a finding which is also evidenced in other research (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Shigaki & Smith, 1997; Tseng & Newton). It should also be noted that this practice of forming bonds with a social network that feels “like family” is reflective of the highly respected Venezuelan value of family, or *familismo*, as evidenced by past research (Carballo-Dieguez, 1989; Comas-Días, 1989; Guanipa, et al., 2002; Padilla, 1981), because Venezuelans strongly hold relationships with others to a high significance as they tend practice collectivism and rely upon one another for emotional support and guidance. Similarly, this formation of a “pseudo” family is reflective of the Latino concept and practice of fictive kin (Lopez, 1999) because Latinos tend to reach beyond their immediate families in search of other individuals who will provide emotional support systems. However, even though these six participants formed social networks with certain social groups, it must be stated that students joined particular groups based on a group’s social salience.

The Salience of Social Categories/Identities. Social identity theory seeks to understand how the social groups to which an individual belongs (whether by assignment or by choice) will impact one’s life experience and how that individual will behave in various social contexts (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT also applies directly to the acculturation process since it fits into the cognitive perspective of individual change (Berry, 2007; Berry et al., 2011), because the cognitive perspective is concerned with how individuals perceive and think about themselves when faced with intercultural differences. The social identity theory can be applied to the lived experiences of the six participants in this study because as aforementioned,

these international students were introduced to a new sociocultural environment and chose to associate with one or more of the following social groups or social categories (Hogg & Abrams, 1988): co-nationals, host nationals, or other international students. An acculturating individual must share the same characteristics, behaviors, values and beliefs with the ingroup (other members of the social group to which an individual belongs) (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), and this was true for all participants. Each participant was part of an ingroup and those students that were satisfied with their ingroup cognitively and behaviorally matched the ingroup prototype, or a cognitive representation of the social identity of the ingroup, and remained loyal to that prototype.

For instance, the ingroup, or main social group for both Ivan and Leo consisted of host national students. These two participants were the most assimilated into the host culture, felt at ease among the host society, and therefore desired to spend most of their time with Americans. They were also the only two participants to live with Americans as well, since they were members of a fraternity. Since Ivan and Leo were members of the host national student ingroup, their actions and values reflected those of the prototype for that group. Ivan states, “Now that I’m here [U.S.] I’m actually part of the society, well I believe I’m part of the society.” Both Ivan and Leo practice the values that they deem as “American” such as hard work, time management, honesty, respect, and the individual drive to succeed. For example, Leo had several individual goals including obtaining a competitive internship position and gaining entry into the top honor society on campus. However, when an individual is part of an ingroup, intergroup comparisons occur. Intergroup social comparisons occur during acculturation, and this process happens when an individual compares his/her ingroup to the outgroup and favors the ingroup while highlighting the differences (usually negative) in an outgroup (Hogg et al., 1995).

Ivan is an excellent example of how an individual favors his ingroup while portraying the outgroup in a negative light. Since Ivan perceives himself to be part of the host national student ingroup, he voiced optimistic and constructive opinions about the U.S. and Americans, while speaking negatively about members of the Venezuelan outgroup. “Venezuela is just unpredictable, and that involves the population as well. You might think you know your neighbor, and then in the end your neighbor is the one that will screw you over.”

However, Anita’s ingroup is the co-national student social group as she fits the prototype of this group because she is comfortable practicing the behaviors, values, and beliefs of her home culture. She has no desire to enter into the host national social group, and this ingroup choice is also reflected in her acculturation strategy of separation from the host culture. Although Anita claimed that Venezuela is “unsafe,” she still puts her home country on a pedestal and shows her deep pride and adoration for it with the definitive statement, “there is no better country than mine,” therefore showing favoritism for her ingroup. Conversely, even though she mentions that America is “safe” and “respectful,” her perspectives of Americans are mostly negative. She discussed how ignorant and racist Americans could be when she told the story of how her American peers asked her, “Do you speak Mexican?”

The remaining three participants, David, Nola and Ana belong to two ingroups (co-national and host national students) and are able to utilize the social identity of either one when it is salient in a particular social context. Unlike Leo, Ivan and Anita who do not wish to join an ingroup different from their own, David, Ana and Nola are able to utilize the behaviors and values of a certain ingroup prototype when various social situations arise. Hogg (2006) states that because an individual possess a repertoire of social identities due to their membership in multiple social categories, one may utilize a particular social identity depending on its salience to

the social context at hand. A certain social category/identity becomes salient when it is accessible from memory (meaning the individual understands the values and behaviors deemed appropriate by a category's ingroup) and if it is evident through signs presented by social interaction (appearance, speech, behavior) (Hogg, 2003).

Therefore, during their sojourn in the U.S., depending on the social context, be it within a lecture hall with host nationals or at a social gathering with co-nationals, a participant who is integrated and who is a part of both social categories (co and host national) shifts the way they are behaving to fit the current ingroup prototype.

David elaborated on how he is less outgoing and quiet with host nationals in the classroom because being boisterous is not a practical behavior in the U.S. academic setting: "Sometimes, it depends, you know, on the context of the – of the situation. I'm more shy in some, uh, so for example in a school related environment. It's quite challenging when it's school related. Not challenging, but I'm a little more shy." On the other hand, when David is "at a party," "at lunch" or even attending a meeting for an extracurricular organization with fellow Venezuelan international students he feels far more comfortable as a social actor because he is able to freely express himself. He says that when Venezuelans are socializing in a loud group, "it's not like they're being rude, it's just they're being, you know, Venezuelans." Ana also referred to different social situations in which she and her Venezuelan cohorts change the way they are interacting or the language they are speaking when a member of the host culture is present.

We [Venezuelans] have to be aware of it [behavior]. You have to be careful with it, because sometimes people don't get it the right way. We speak Spanish when we are together. Yeah, we don't have to make that effort. It's not like we care of making that

effort, like ‘Ah! The Americans are coming (laughs) and we have to speak English!’ No! We have this switch, like, there’s an American. And you start speaking English, and we don’t care.

Therefore, the participants who practiced the acculturation strategy of integration were more likely to shift between the social categories of both social groups of which they are a part, which is a finding similar to a qualitative study by Colic-Peisker & Walker (2003). However, some students in this study actually became marginal members of their ingroup at the beginning of their sojourn and moved to another social category ingroup.

Social Mobility between Social Categories. Social mobility, or moving from one social category to another, occurs when one moves from a perceived lower status group to a more favorable/higher status social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Ivan, Nola, and Leo utilized social mobility to move (psychologically) from the original ingroup that they were a part of when they first entered the U.S. as university students (co-nationals) to the host national social group. These participants found the host national social group more desirable because interacting and forming social ties with American students would offer resources, opportunity, genuine friendship, and the true American sociocultural “experience.” For instance, Ivan discussed that during the first weeks of his sojourn, he spent a great deal of time with other Venezuelans, but soon that changed, as he desired to be more independent:

At the beginning when I needed them, they [Venezuelan students] were great. They helped me out, they helped me establish those first few weeks, then after that I said thank you very much but I’m gonna try and make my own friends and make my own name in this university. So I started expanding on my own. I started getting involved with other

organizations, people on campus, so by doing so I found myself, you know, like I live in a house full of Americans in my fraternity house.

Since Ivan had previous relationships with Americans due to his yearlong experience abroad as a high school exchange student, it was simple for him to perform what Hogg (2012) calls “psychologically passing from one group into another” (p. 507) since he comprehended the social identity (values, behaviors, beliefs) of the dominant host national student group. Ivan desired to move between social groups because he saw that close-knit “circle” of fellow Venezuelans as a barrier to fully adapting to the host culture. In other words, he felt that exclusive membership to the co-national social group would restrict his adaptation into U.S. society.

Similarly, Nola claimed that when she associated solely with fellow Venezuelan students at the beginning of her stay in the U.S., it was “like having a piece of home,” but as more co-national students joined the social group “it started getting a little uncomfortable because – you felt that they were being friends with you just because you are Venezuelan, so they have to be your friend by default.” Nola did not believe her friendships with some co-nationals were genuine, so she put herself on the margins of that social group by spending more time with Americans, both in and outside of class, and the benefit for her joining this social group was twofold. First, she felt she was establishing true friendships with Americans, and second, these relationships allowed her to practice her English skills and experience the host culture firsthand. Friendships with Americans enabled Nola to truly learn about, practice and adapt to the host culture, which gave her the knowledge of the host student social category that she needed to engage in social mobility. Thus, this participant was disidentifying with the ingroup in order to gain psychological entry into the more desirable status group (Hogg, 2005; Hogg, 2012).

Leo also explained why he chose to interact with people “out of that circle” of Venezuelan international students in the context of the Midwestern University:

Because I came here to study abroad. I left my family, I left my friends, and everything in order to speak English, to get involved, to maybe get a job after college, and I needed an American environment. Eh, I love the Venezuelans here. [...] But I spend more time with Americans because I left Venezuela, as I said, I left my friends and everything, and if I would want to speak Spanish and have Venezuelan parties all the time, I will still be in Venezuela.

Therefore, Leo was willing to take on and adopt the prototypical qualities (speaking English, becoming involved with American organizations) of the desired social group (host nationals), because he saw exclusive membership in the co-national group as a factor that would prevent him from living the true American experience, an idea similar to the other participants who utilized social mobility. Leo was able to cast aside his subordinate social identity with its negative connotations in favor of becoming a member of the more desirable and beneficial social group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), which enabled him to be successful in the host society.

Limitations of the Study

Given that this study was a qualitative case study focused on the personal lived experiences of six international students from Venezuela undergoing the process of acculturation as they attended a Midwestern U.S. university, the feelings and ideas shared by the participants are unique to their encounters within the host culture and do not encompass the acculturative experiences of all Venezuelan international scholars within the U.S. context.

It must also be stated that due to the small number of participants who engaged in this qualitative case study, this research does not lend itself to discern gender differences. Although

the results revealed in Chapter IV may have reflected some differences between male and female participants, those results were not discussed in detail because the main purpose of this case study was to focus on the acculturative experiences of six undergraduate international students from Venezuela studying in the Midwestern U.S. and to investigate if and how this process of acculturation affected these students' acculturative stress levels and social identity choices.

Additionally, it is important to note the limitations of Berry's acculturation model. While Berry's acculturation model served as the theoretical foundation of this study, various facets of the model were utilized only as a reference during the data analysis stage, mainly the four acculturation strategies. Although Berry's model of acculturation served as a constructive theoretical guide regarding the four main ways that an individual can acculturate into a new sociocultural setting (integration, separation, marginalization or assimilation), this aspect of the model identifies and upholds the four fixed extremes evident in the process of acculturation. However, my research has revealed that although some participants were more assimilated into mainstream U.S. society than others, none of the participants were what Berry would label as fully assimilated, meaning that an individual has completely given up the values, relationships and practices of their home culture, because even the most "assimilated" of my participants respected and upheld prominent Venezuelan values. Therefore, an aspect of this type of in-depth research regarding social identity, acculturative stress, and coping strategies that seems to require more attention is a theoretical model that captures the fluidity of identity and cultural adaptation as they occur during the process of acculturation.

Suggestions for Future Research

As this study only touches upon the role that the federal government of Venezuela and various political debates played in the lives of Venezuelan university students, it would be

advantageous to future researchers to conduct a study focused on how the sociopolitical situation within Venezuela is impacting the current and future goals and decisions of university students in the Venezuela. A common theme found in this study highlighted that the “unsafe” environment in Venezuela due to political tension was a main push factor both driving students to the U.S. and influencing their decision to either return to Venezuela or remain in the host country upon completing their higher education. Therefore, future research can seek to explore if and why other international students from Venezuela in the U.S. believe that the social climate in their home country is unsafe and susceptible to acts of violence. Understanding the “why” to the aforementioned question could present an original set of data regarding this group of international students; therefore, future researchers should be aware of this crucial information when it is presented and prompt participants to explicate their ideas and feelings regarding these issues in order to gather richer, more valid data.

Additionally, during the time when the qualitative data for this study was in the process of being collected (fall 2012), Venezuela was in the middle of a pivotal presidential election between Chávez and his opponent, Henrique Capriles. Although Chávez did win re-election, his death in March 2013 will dramatically alter the future of Venezuela in many ways. As of the completion of this paper, there remain many unanswered questions and uncertainties surrounding Venezuela’s political future. It may be intriguing for upcoming research studies to interview international students from Venezuela attending universities in the U.S. regarding if and how their post graduation plans and goals have shifted as a result of these changes.

Also, as this study highlighted the importance of social networks and social belonging for international students from Venezuela studying in the U.S., this study may establish the initial framework for future research to investigate if university-based organizations that encourage

cross-cultural contact between this group of international students and their host national peers is indeed beneficial, both socially and psychologically, for international students. Thus, future qualitative studies may find that university-based organizations that encourage intercultural communication play a role in reducing the acculturative stresses associated with the English language and new cultural behaviors that are experienced by international students from Venezuela.

Finally, since this study also investigated the fluidity of social identity for acculturating individuals in various social contexts, it may be intriguing for future researchers to inquire about the notion of “losing identity,” understood as the loss of one’s identity during the process of acculturation. Or, researchers may find that an identity shift represents a suspension of one’s core identity (or home identity) for the sake of learning about, adjusting to, and coping with a new sociocultural environment. Thus, those interested in the psychological components of identity and acculturation may be interested in pursuing such research.

Summary

This chapter explored the findings in chapter IV, which revealed individual and collective personal experiences of six international students from Venezuela studying in the Midwestern U.S., and applied them within the context of the acculturation and social identity literature. The research questions were addressed in detail and supported with quotes from the personal interviews with all participants. First, the acculturation processes and strategies of each participant were explained by situating them within relevant, previous qualitative research. This section also highlighted the social and psychological factors that influenced each participant’s acculturation strategy utilized and social groups joined in the host country. The subsequent section explained how the main stresses of English proficiency and social differences endured by

Latino international students in the literature were reflected in the findings in this study. Similarly, the coping strategy used by these participants of forming a “pseudo” family with either co-national or host national students (or both) was a major coping mechanism outlined in the literature as well, especially for the Latino international student population. Finally, the salient social categories/identities and the social mobility choices of certain participants were situated within related literature to reveal that the social categories/identities were reflective of the acculturation strategies utilized and the social networks joined by the participants in this study. This chapter also described that this study possesses limitations due to its restricted number of participants and the fixed extremes of the four acculturative strategies in Berry’s model. In addition, this chapter suggested that future researchers may benefit from engaging international Venezuelan students (within the context of the U.S.) in deeper discussions with questions surrounding how the sociopolitical context of Venezuela may affect their future choices. Forthcoming studies on the process of acculturation may also choose to focus on the fluidity of social identity and the idea of “losing identity” as these elements may influence research which encompasses the psychological components of acculturation.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

I. Demographics/General Information

1. Tell me about yourself in a few sentences.
2. Why did you come to the US for college?
3. What do you plan to do after you graduate from college?

II. Life Prior to U.S.

4. Explain your life (what it was like) before you lived in the US.
 - a. How did you feel about your academic skills while you lived at home?
 - b. How did you feel about your social skills while you lived at home?

III. Life in the U.S.

5. Tell me about your life in the US as an international student.
 - a. How do you feel about your academic skills now that you are living in the US?
 - b. How do you feel about your social skills now that you are living in the US?
6. Describe your first impression of Americans.
7. Tell me about your interactions with American students.
 - a. How do you feel when you interact with American students?
8. Tell me about interactions with other [Venezuelan] students from your home country.
 - a. How do you feel when you interact with these students?
9. Which group do you spend more time with? - Why?

IV. Cultural Elements

10. What are some cultural aspects of your home culture that are different than to US culture?
11. What are some cultural aspects of your home culture that are similar to US culture?

V. Stress and Acculturation/Coping Strategies

12. Describe any stressful cultural/social situations you have experienced while living in the US.
 - a. How have these affected your life?
 - b. Challenges? How do you deal with or overcome these challenges?
13. What kinds of cultural/social differences have you seen/experienced while living in the US?

- 14. Have you adopted any new cultural ideas/behaviors since coming to the US?
- 15. Have you lost any (Venezuelan) behaviors/mindset [or elements of your home culture] since moving to the US?

VI. Identity

- 16. Would you describe yourself as (home/Venezuelan), American, or something in-between?

APPENDIX B: CONTACT SUMMARY FORM

Letter: ____
Pseudonym: _____

Contact Summary Form

Contact Type: Interview

Contact Date: _____

Written By: Sarah D.

Today's Date: _____

1. What were the main issues/themes that struck you in this contact?

-

-

-

2. Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions you had.

Stress:Goals:Acculturation strategy:Social identities:In/out group:

3. Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?

4. What new (or remaining) target questions do you have?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

School of Educational Foundations, Leadership & Policy

Letter of Informed Consent

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Below is a brief outline of information you need to know about the study and the observation/interview process.

Title of the project: Sustaining Cultural Identity: The Process of Acculturation and Coping Strategies of Venezuelan Students at a Midwestern U.S. University

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to examine if and how the stress and low levels of self-esteem generated by the process of acculturation can be affected by various coping strategies.

Description of study: In order to participate in the study you must be 18 years of age or older. You will be asked to complete a demographic information survey, and you will be asked a series of individual interview questions. These questions will focus on your experience as an international student from Venezuela studying in the United States. These interviews should take no more than 60 minutes. The interview may be audio recorded with your permission.

Confidentiality: The individual interviews will take place in an open studio setting. The open studio setting will be located in a separate room within a public library. No one will be present in the room except for the researcher and participant. All data collected will remain confidential. All data will be stored in a secure filing system and on a password protected computer within the locked office of the principal investigator. No one other than the principal investigator will have access to the data obtained. Additionally, no name or individual subject identifiers will be connected with the data obtained during the interviews. Any data obtained through interviews by the principal investigator will not include any confidential information and pseudonyms will be used in the final research paper. The filing system will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Voluntary participation: Participation in the current research project is entirely voluntary. You are free to decline to participate and may stop or withdraw from the project at any time.

Risks or discomforts: There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Deciding to participate or not will not impact any relationship you may have with BGSU.

Benefits: There are no known benefits to you by participating in the study. However, the results of this study may provide practicing educators an insight as to how international students utilize coping strategies in response to the stress and low self-esteem levels produced by the process of acculturating into a new dominant society. Also, you will receive a \$10.00 VISA gift card for your participation in the study.

Contact Information: Please feel free to contact the researcher if you have questions or concerns about this research project.

- Researcher: Sarah Dellinger, Graduate Student, Master of Arts in International and Cross-cultural Education, Bowling Green State University, oroszs@bgsu.edu, 419-204-0040.
- Graduate Advisor: Dr. Patricia Kubow, Professor, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Policy, Bowling Green State University, pkubow@bgsu.edu, 419-372-7380.
- For information on participants' rights, contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716, hsrb.bgsu.edu.

I have been informed about the consent form. My role in this research project has been explained to me. I have been informed I will remain confidential throughout the course of this study. I am free to discontinue participation during data collection at any time. I agree to take part in the research (and to have an audio recording created of what I say).

Participant signature _____ **date** _____

Investigator signature _____ **date** _____

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BGSU HSRB - APPROVED FOR USE
IRBNet ID # 329394
EFFECTIVE 05/09/2012
EXPIRES 04/28/2013

APPENDIX D: HSRB APPROVAL FORM



DATE: May 11, 2012

TO: Sarah Dellinger, Bachelor of Science in Education
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [329394-2] Sustaining Cultural Identity: The Process of Acculturation and Coping Strategies of Venezuelan Students at a Midwestern U.S. University
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: May 9, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: April 28, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 10 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 28, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.