

## Review Article:

# Immigrant-Established Resident Interactions in Miami, Florida

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## Abstract

This article examines factors that affect interethnic relations in Miami, Florida. The theoretical framework, based on the 'contact hypothesis' argues that better interethnic relations stem from not only contact, but also contact in which individuals from opposing groups share equal status and a stake in outcomes, and when contact activities require cooperation. The contact hypothesis, however, does not address the factors that produce inequality in social relations. To address these factors ideas from international migration research are used to argue that those with power must create structures in which other groups feel welcome rather than rejected and that leaders must emphasize similarities rather than differences among groups.

**Keywords:** Interethnic relations, Miami, international migration, contact hypothesis, Cubans, Haitians.

In 2000, about 15 years after the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce (GMCC) had begun their initiative to integrate Cubans, Anglo 'American'<sup>1</sup> armed federal US Immigration officials snatched the Cuban boy, Elián Gonzalez, from the Miami Little Havana home of his relatives to reunite him with his Cuban father. The raid provoked local Latinos to take to the streets and protest the government's actions. These demonstrations at the same time revealed widespread anti-Cuban vehemence from both blacks and whites. This incident greatly strained the positive feelings between Anglo and Cuban businessmen that had been fostered by the Chamber's initiative. Producing, let alone maintaining, good relations between different ethnic groups is never easy and perhaps never finished. Yet, it remains one of the most important challenges to the stability of any nation state.

Poor relations between immigrants and established residents and the resulting acrimony, violence and disruption are certainly not limited to Miami. For example, there were conflicts between African Americans and Koreans in the 1992 Los Angeles riots (Abelmann & Lie 1995, Bergesen & Herman 1998). In New York, racial and ethnic strife has included civil disorder in the Latino neighborhood of Washington Heights, conflict between African Americans and Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights, black boycotts of Korean merchants, a series of interracial killings, and a black protestor shooting and torching Anglo and Latino employees of a Jewish-owned clothing store in Harlem (Shapiro 2006).

Violent, episodic events such as these are often triggered by smoldering nativism that, often hand-in-hand with racism, inspire anti-immigrant initiatives, battles against voting districts based on race, and welfare reform that disproportionately targets legal immigrants and native minorities. More fundamentally, these battles embody concerns about the nature of America. Residents ask: Are we a single nation with a core of unifying beliefs? Or, are we sub-divided into 100% Americans and many hyphenated Americans? Are we moving toward unity or balkanizing? More specifically in Miami, established residents wonder if Miami will become a fundamentally Latino city? Will it literally and essentially embody the Miami Cuban joke that what they like so much about Miami is that it is so close to the US? Will the 'real Americans' – *i.e.* Anglo and African Americans – all leave Miami? Or, will Miami mimic urban areas such as New York and Chicago, cities that accepted and absorbed tens of thousands of immigrants, yet remain American?

This article briefly examines factors that affect interethnic relations in Miami, Florida where we have conducted nearly 30 years of fieldwork and numerous research projects. Our theoretical framework is based on the 'contact hypothesis'. We argue that better interethnic relations stem from not only contact, but also contact in which individuals from opposing groups share equal status and a stake in outcomes, and when contact activities require cooperation. The contact hypothesis, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Anglo is the local term for non-Hispanic whites. Cubans object to referring to the Anglo population as "white" because many Cubans are predominantly of European origin and perceive themselves to be as white as Anglos. Jews, who have been historically important in Miami, object to being lumped in with Anglos, yet the term is still generally used to refer to non-Hispanic whites regardless of religious background.

does not address the factors that produce inequality in social relations. To address these, we turn to international migration research to augment our theoretical framework. More particularly, we argue that those with power must create structures in which other groups feel welcome rather than rejected and that leaders must emphasize similarities rather than differences among groups.

## Theoretical Framework: Diversity and the Contact Hypothesis

Arguably the most influential idea in the past 30 years in the area of studies of nationalism has been Benedict Anderson's notion that nations are imagined communities (Anderson 1999). Accordingly, all societies and particularly all nation states have internal diversity. With the increase of international migration at the end of the last and continuing into the current century and the shifting of boundaries associated with the demise of the Soviet Union and expansion of the European Union, there has been extensive popular and academic discussion of integration. Under consideration are both normative ideas of how migrants should integrate and descriptive analyses of how migrants are faring at integrating, particularly in terms of education and employment. Within this tradition of studies of nationalism, there is, however, comparatively little empirical research on face-to-face, day-to-day interactions between groups, whether migrants and natives or majority and minority populations.

Most of the work on interethnic relations comes from psychology and is guided by the contact hypothesis. More than forty years of research on inter-group relations has largely supported the contact hypothesis originally formulated by Allport (1954). Much of the empirical research in this area has been on the effects of school desegregation in the US. School desegregation resulted from the US Supreme Court's ruling in 1954 that schools cannot be segregated on the basis of race. Following this ruling, schools throughout the nation made efforts to bring Black and White students into the same schools, that is, to desegregate and become integrated.

Early versions of the contact hypothesis predicted that simply increased contact with people who were different would improve relations or at least attitudes toward those who are different. This prediction, however, was not readily confirmed by the empirical research. Some reviews show that interracial contact in desegregated schools shows no positive effects on inter-group relations (St. John 1975, Stephan 1978). Others suggest that in the long-term the positive benefits to interracial contact in desegregated schools are reflected when students become adults and have positive interracial experiences in such settings as neighborhoods and the workplace (Braddock & Dawkins 1984).

One reason that school integration did not produce better relations among youth was that it did not necessarily result in significant contact between Blacks and Whites, as students segregated themselves within the schools and had little contact with each other. Students would self-segregate, for example, in the school cafeteria. School officials often 'tracked' students into different levels by academic ability and this usually resulted in classrooms that were *de facto* segregated (Allport 1954, Collins & Noblit 1978, Eddy 1975, Gerard & Conolley 1975, Orfield 1975, Rogers *et al.* 1984). As Pettigrew (1969) explained, desegregation, which refers to the existence of a racially mixed environment, does not necessarily imply true integration, which refers to the creation of a setting conducive to the development of positive relations between members of different groups.

There were some schools where positive inter-group relations did emerge, but they require a revision of the simple contact hypothesis. Besides contact, other conditions must also be present to encourage positive relations among different groups. These are: (1) equal-status contact between individuals from majority and minority groups, and (2) an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition. Leaders' explicit support for positive relations helps, too (Schofield 1989).

The question remains, what social conditions encourage equal status and cooperation instead of competition? To address this question we adapt a theoretical idea from international migration studies, the notion of context of reception i.e. the opportunities available to immigrants and how immigrants are treated by members of the host society (Portes & Borocz 1989, Portes & Rumbaut 2006). If immigrants are welcomed, if they are given legal status and access to work, housing, and other amenities, they are more likely to prosper. If on the other hand, they are denied legal status, face barriers in the labor and housing markets and more general prejudice and discrimination, they are more likely to suffer. These opportunities and barriers are socially constructed by those who have power, usually the established residents, that is, those who lived in the host country before the arrival of the immigrants and who continue to live where the immigrants reside. Some of the opportunities and barriers are created at the national level, such as awarding versus denying a legal immigration status. Others, such as access to employment, are more likely to be created and enforced locally.

Not all immigrants are treated equally. In the US, some, such as those classified by the government as refugees, are welcomed and granted a legal immigration status, which in turn affords the possibility of free and legal access to the local labor and housing markets and access to some form of benefits. Others confront a more negative context of reception. They may objectively be fleeing persecution and conditions that apparently deserve the treatment afforded to migrants recognized as refugees by the government. However, if the federal government does not define them as refugees, regardless of the documented circumstances in their home country, then they may not have legal status or access to benefits or the labor market, even if they settle in the same region as those who have been welcomed with a positive context of reception. Such is the contrast between those migrants considered in this article. Cubans have been recognized by the US government as refugees and have been accorded a positive context of reception in South Florida, and subsequently contributed to a positive context of reception for later arriving Cubans in the region. In contrast, Haitians, fleeing often horrific repression and poverty in their home country but not recognized as refugees, have confronted a much more negative context of reception in South Florida.

Most previous writings considering context of reception have articulated only a general context of reception without distinguishing how the context may be different at national, regional or local levels (Portes & Borocz 1989, Portes & Rumbaut 2006). Context of reception, that is influenced by and felt at the regional, and the much more micro, local, face-to-face level has been the object of fewer studies and analysis (Stepick & Dutton Stepick 2001, Stepick *et al.* 2003). The contexts of reception produced by these multiple levels may be consistent, viz. an immigrant group may easily obtain legal status, benefits, and also be welcomed by members of local communities. On the other hand, it may be inconsistent; for example, refugees may be accepted through the nation-state legal system and may have established a comfortable niche for themselves in ethnic or immigrant neighborhoods, but encounter prejudice when they move beyond the neighborhood into, for example, the workforce or educational system.

Similarly, the context of reception may evolve over time. Immigrants to the US in the last great migrant wave over the end of the 19th through the first part of the 20th century were often not welcomed by local communities (although the federal government did grant easy access to legal status until the 1920s). But, by the 1950s when the second generation had matured, there were relatively few expressions of rejection toward those of immigrant backgrounds in local communities.<sup>2</sup> In more contemporary times, as Portes and Fernández-Kelly (2008) recently noted, the context of reception has changed over time for Cubans who were warmly welcomed starting in 1960 until the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Although not noted by Portes and Fernández-Kelly, the Mariel context of reception varied by level with the national government still allowing nearly all the Cuban Mariel newcomers a legal immigration status, while the local South Florida community was more likely to negatively stereotype the Mariel newcomers (Alberts 2005, Croucher 1997, Portes & Stepick 1985).

## Method

For more than 20 years, we have been analyzing interethnic relations in Miami. During this period, we have used both quantitative and qualitative methods and applied them to diverse substantive issues (see *inter alia*, Portes & Stepick 1993, Stepick 1998, Stepick *et al.* 2001, Stepick *et al.* 2003, Stepick *et al.* 2008). In this article, we focus on interethnic relations in everyday life in concrete contexts where people from different groups come together and interact. The four primary groups we report on in this article are Anglos, Cubans, African Americans and Haitians. Since these data were collected in natural settings, there were often people from other groups present, too. The natural settings where we did most of our fieldwork were schools, workplaces and business organizations. We triangulated three methods: (1) longitudinal participant observation, (2) intensive interviews and, (3) focus groups. Triangulating these data permits us to understand how in fact, on a day-to-day basis, people of different ethnic backgrounds actually do or do not get along. We examine not only norms of inter-group interaction, but also their actual behaviors in context.

The qualitative data helped us to examine the processes of interethnic interaction. All groups and most individuals within them can articulate norms and report behaviors, but there is frequently a considerable inconsistency between statements about behavior and actual behavior. To validly determine the extent and nature of inter-ethnic relations, we chose to directly observe people in

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that all prejudice toward, for example, Jews and Italians had disappeared; only that it was much less than it had been 50-75 years earlier.

multiple settings. Direct observation in many natural contexts, along with in-depth interviewing, helped us approach a valid understanding of inter-ethnic relations.

While we feel the methods are particularly appropriate for our research goals, we recognize that they also have limitations. Ethnography provides excellent depth and rich understandings, but it is not as easily replicable as surveys or other standardized, more quantifiable methods.

The fundamental question we address is: What is the nature of and how much group interaction exists across ethnic groups between immigrants and established residents, and across different immigrant groups? In what contexts does group interaction result in conflict and when does it produce cooperation and mutual support? What factors appear to account for the different outcomes? To answer these questions, we begin by describing the larger context, *i.e.* the context of reception at the national, regional and local levels for immigrant Cubans and Haitians who settled in the Miami area of South Florida. After outlining the contrasting contexts of reception for these two groups, we examine some ethnographic examples that reveal the role of leaders and how equal status and cooperative activities can produce improved relations.

## Miami's Contexts of Reception

Miami-Dade County, Florida constitutes a strategic research site for addressing questions of interethnic relations among native or established residents and new or immigrant residents. It has the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any major metropolitan area in the US. Its primary immigrant groups contain both Hispanic/Latino and Black immigrants. All together immigrants form a majority of the population in the County.

### Cubans

The South Florida county of Miami-Dade<sup>3</sup> has been an immigrant gateway since the early 1960's. In the County, over 50% of the total population was born outside the US, the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any US major metropolitan area and proportionally 50% more than either Los Angeles or New York.<sup>4</sup> This demographic shift began with the Cuban Revolution in 1959 that initiated migratory waves of Cubans to the Miami region. By the year 2000 the number of Cubans stood at over 870,000 in South Florida where they are not only the largest immigrant group in the area, but they are also the most concentrated newcomer immigrant group in the US.

Cubans began arriving during the Cold War and the US offered them an extraordinarily generous welcome that not only allowed them to achieve economic success unparalleled in its rapidity, but also vaulted them to local political influence and power. Miami Cubans receive permanent residency after one-year in the US, regardless of whether they originally arrived through a legal channel or an illegal route. They are also eligible for social benefits paid for by the federal US government. In the 1960s and 1970s, a vast array of benefits was made available that allowed the then primarily middle and upper class Cuban immigrants to quickly re-certify their professional credentials or establish businesses. Today, newly arrived Cubans receive fewer benefits, but newcomers still receive a legal immigration status<sup>5</sup> and the possibility of various short-term benefits, such as English language and job-training classes.

Miami's Cubans, along with smaller numbers of other Latino immigrants, made Miami the economic and transportation gateway of the Americas. While Miami has only five percent of the total US Latino population, it has close to half of the forty largest Latino-owned industrial and commercial firms in the country. Many of the area's most important private firms are headed by Latinos, both Miami Cubans and other Latinos. The largest Latino firm in the country, MasTec Telecom, was established in Miami by a Cuban *émigré*. Also located in Miami are the largest Latino real estate development company in the US, the largest Latino-owned banks, along with the majority of Latino owned

3 We confine our discussion here to the greater Miami area of Miami-Dade County. When we refer to South Florida we mean the three county area encompassing Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties, all located in the Southeastern corner of the state of Florida.

4 Both New York and Los Angeles do have a greater absolute number of residents who were foreign-born.

5 There are a few exceptions. During the Mariel boatlift in 1980, those who were thought to have criminal records in Cuba were detained. Beginning in 1994, the US government only granted a legal immigration status to those who made it to US shores. If a boat was intercepted by the US Coast Guard before it or the people in it touched US shores, the occupants could be returned to Cuba.

large construction firms. Only New York has more foreign-owned banks than Miami. Nearly 50% of US exports to the Caribbean and Central America and over 30% of US exports to South America pass through Miami. Miami's Free Trade Zone is the first and largest privately owned trade zone in the world. Miami International Airport is the top US airport for international freight with more no-stop cargo flights to Latin America and the Caribbean than Orlando, Houston, New Orleans, Atlanta, Tampa and New York's Kennedy airports combined. This airport also serves more airlines than any other airport in the Western Hemisphere and it is frequently easier to get from one Latin American country to another by going through Miami than directly. Miami also has the largest cruise port in the world, ironically transporting primarily US passengers on vacations throughout the Caribbean and Latin America while many of the citizens of those countries are immigrating to Miami. While Miami may not be a global city equal to New York or London, it is assuredly one of the leading economic capitals of Latin America (Nijman 1996, 1997, 2000), and its Latino immigrants made it so.

The influence of Miami's Cubans extends beyond economics into politics. Miami Cuban representatives of the real estate and construction industries have become the movers and shakers in local politics. Cuban immigrants politically dominate the City of Miami, Hialeah, the county's second-largest city, and Miami-Dade's County Commission. Two Miami Cubans are in the US House of Representatives, and the Miami-Dade County state legislative delegation, along with the Miami-Dade County School Board are dominated by Cubans.

The economic and political accomplishments of the earlier arrivals paves the path toward integration for newly arrived Cubans who can relatively readily find work among other Cubans, most likely in a firm with Cuban owners and management. Local government and non-governmental agencies are also likely to have many Cuban employees. Cubans may also dominate in the places where one does one's shopping and from whom one rents a place to live. All of this can be accomplished in Spanish resulting in little pressure to learn English. Perhaps most importantly, Cubans never have to worry about their immigration status. The US grants permanent residence almost automatically to Cubans.<sup>6</sup>

All of these factors combine to make it relatively easy for recently arrived Cubans to integrate into the Miami community, both economically and socially, and Cubans themselves have created a context of reception that greatly benefits more recent Cuban migrants. For Cubans the context of reception in the US from the level of nation state policies to that of regional acceptance and local micro-level interactions is as consistently positive as possible.

## Haitians

Most of the Cubans in Miami are phenotypically white. Miami also has received a significant influx of Caribbean, primarily Black, immigrants (Dunn 1997, Freeman 2002). Much of the original black population that settled and built Miami at the end of the 19th century was from the Bahamas (Anderson 1996, Shell-Weiss & Davis 2005). Many Miami Blacks who appear as African Americans to outsiders claim a distinctively Bahamian background. More recently, other Caribbean Blacks have settled in Miami. In Broward County, immediately to the north of Miami-Dade County, Jamaicans followed by Haitians are the two largest immigrant groups. More black foreigners immigrated to Broward County between 2001 and 2005 than to any other county in the United States. Also, Florida is home to the largest concentration of Haitian migrants of any state in the US with over 250,000 living in South Florida.<sup>7</sup>

Among contemporary immigrant groups, Haitians confront at all levels consistently negative contexts of reception. The US federal government has routinely sought to discourage Haitians from coming to the United States by using the US Coast Guard to interdict boats off the shores of Haiti that may be headed for the US. Individual Haitians are almost never granted asylum or refugee status regardless of either general political chaos or evidence of individual persecution back in Haiti. Instead, the government jails without parole Haitians who do make it to the US without a visa and claiming

6 The most important causes of this positive context of reception were the class profile of the earliest arriving Cubans, who tended to be from the island's elite, and the unprecedented, extensive benefits the US government granted Cubans as a symbol of the US anti-communism policies in the middle of the Cold War (Stepick 1996, Stepick & Dutton Stepick 2001, Stepick & Grenier 1993, Stepick *et al.* 2003).

7 The 2000 US Census counted nearly 270,000 Haitians in the state of Florida, making it the largest Haitian origin population concentration in the US, surpassing the numbers of Haitians in the New York metropolitan area. Incidentally, estimates of immigrant populations are notoriously unreliable. The US Census probably undercounts immigrants, especially those who may have an uncertain immigrant status. Conversely, immigrant organizations frequently overestimate their numbers.



they want to stay.<sup>8</sup> At the more local level, Haitians confront further prejudice and discrimination from the general population that commonly identifies them as poor and without skills, and undeserving of residence in the US (Stepick 1998).

Miami is also in the southern part of the US, which until the 1960s practiced legalized segregation of Blacks and Whites. Segregation began to be dismantled at approximately the same time that Cubans began arriving in Miami (George 1978, Mohl 1989). The fate of the local African Americans experiencing their civil rights and that of Cubans experiencing what they also perceived as freedom became a constant comparison. Most of Miami's Blacks and native white leaders, along with some academicians, commonly presume that Miami Cuban success has been at the expense of Miami's Blacks. One black leader bluntly asserted, 'It is a fact of life that Cubans displaced Blacks.' Moreover, with a 1980 anti-bilingual, anti-multicultural referendum, Miami gave birth to the contemporary English Only, anti-immigrant movement that swept through other states with concentrations of immigrants, such as California.

Undoubtedly, immigrant influxes are associated with increased conflict. The Miami riot of 1989 was started when a white Colombian immigrant policeman shot and killed a black Caribbean immigrant motorcyclist in Miami's originally segregated neighborhood, 'Colored Town,' now referred to as Overtown. Nevertheless, there are occasions and particular environments where interethnic relations are not negative.

## Producing Better Interethnic Relations

### Anglos and Cuban Business and Political Leaders

While the US federal government provided an unambiguously positive context of reception for Cubans, the sentiments of the local Anglo population was decidedly more mixed. The increased power of Cubans came primarily at the cost of white Americans who responded in two opposed fashions. Up through the mid-1980s, more than 20 years since Cubans first began to arrive, local leaders presumed that Cubans would assimilate, specifically that Cubans would learn English, stop speaking Spanish, and pay less attention to Cuban politics and more to American politics. Moreover, a significant part of the local established resident population insisted on these principles of assimilation.

One group, primarily the white working class, tried to turn the positive context of reception for Cubans into a negative one. In 1980, they spearheaded a successful drive to declare the county to have English as the official language and to make American culture the official culture (for more details, see Stepick *et al.* 2003). This effort, however, had exactly the opposite effect. It prompted Cubans to politically mobilize and to become much more involved in local politics than they had in the past. As a result, within a few years they achieved the political domination described above, eventually making Miami-Dade County officially bilingual and even requiring all official County written materials to be printed in three languages: English, Spanish and Haitian Creole.

The Anglo elites were as frustrated as the Anglo working class at the rapid ascent of Cubans, but they ended up adopting a strategy that encouraged more interethnic interaction rather than less. Instead of attempting to force the Cubans to adopt American ways, the Anglo Americans engaged in reverse acculturation, *i.e.* they began to adapt to the Cuban presence. In 1977, for example, the Miami Herald took an unprecedented, decisive step. Instead of insisting the Cubans learn English, which the English Only effort attempted, the Miami Herald began publication of a daily Spanish-language edition, *El Herald*. *El Herald* marked the first time a US newspaper chain had published a Spanish-language edition. With this, a key actor within the local business elite acknowledged the need to speak to the 'Other,' *i.e.* the Cubans, in his/her own language, albeit perhaps only grudgingly and for a very compelling business need rather than out of cultural enlightenment. In 1987, it went one step further when it created a brand-new Spanish-language newspaper, *El Nuevo Herald* that was virtually independent of the English edition. It had its own building, its own reporting staff, and most important, its own editors, overwhelmingly Cuban Americans.

In 1989, the Miami Herald took yet another step toward the Cuban community when it hired David Lawrence as publisher. When Lawrence, an Anglo American, arrived in Miami, he took Spanish lessons and was tutored in the cultural nuances of the Latino community by a Cuban American professor. In a Sunday opinion piece, he then called on everyone to follow his example. He hailed multicultural

<sup>8</sup> During the 1980s the US government mistakenly branded Haitians as public health risks. First, the government claimed Haitians were bringing tuberculosis into the US, and then it erroneously claimed Haitians were one of the sources of the HIV/AIDS virus (Stepick, 1998).

Miami as an example to the entire nation and at the 'cutting edge' of the America to come. He urged fellow Miamians to 'get on' and enroll in a foreign language class (Lawrence 1991).

Anglos actively began to incorporate Latinos, almost all of whom were Cubans, in elite circles, especially those Latino executives in large 'American' banks, corporations, and law firms. They elected Latinos to the chairmanship of key civic organizations such as the United Way of Dade County and the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce (GMCC). Latino membership in the Chamber increased from about 5 percent at the beginning of the 1980s to over a third at that decade's end. An Anglo "American" banker with close ties with the Chamber stated:

'Well, the Chamber is a very interesting study all by itself. In the mid-1980s, there were 800 members and it was 90% Anglos and nine per cent Hispanic and one per cent Black. Five years later, it was probably 55% Anglo and the balance largely Hispanic, and it had grown from 800 to 4,000 members. In 1989, we got a Hispanic leader. The Executive Committee of the Chamber's representation is not just token. We have Blacks, women, Hispanics for the first time. We try to identify leadership, bring that leadership along to be interested in the whole community. The Chamber today is amongst the strongest leadership institutions in this community.'

The Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s became much more forceful and unified when it took the initiative to reach out to both Cubans and African Americans. Waiting for them to come to the chamber, as it had done up until the mid 1980s, was not sufficient. Even more importantly, the Cuban newcomers were not just tokens, but given actual positions of influence and power. The unity of the chamber increased significantly when Cubans were elected as important committee chairs and eventually as president.<sup>9</sup>

This Chamber of Commerce example reflects the various tenets of both the contact hypothesis and the context of reception. The positive context of reception and resultant rapid Cuban success meant that the most important relationships were between the Anglo business and political elite and successful Cubans. As indicated by the contact hypothesis, leaders made a difference, particularly the leaders of the dominant host community, *i.e.* the Anglo leaders in the Miami Herald and the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce (GMCC). As the GMCC was an organization of business leaders, then incorporating Cuban business leaders fulfilled the condition of having a stake in the outcome. Moreover, the successful integration of Cubans into the GMCC was effective only when the Chamber created conditions of equal status by seeking to have Cubans also in leadership positions within the organization.

## Haitians and African Americans in Schools

Context of reception can vary both for different groups and by level of geography. We detailed above how Haitians were not warmly welcomed and encountered a negative context of reception. Because of continuing *de facto* racial segregation in residence, Haitians live in primarily African American neighborhoods and Haitian youth attend schools primarily with African American youth. While Haitians and African Americans are both black, they do not necessarily feel solidarity with each other. The general attitudes of prejudice and discrimination toward Haitians can be found among some African Americans.

In the early exodus of Haitians to Miami, the primarily African American neighborhood high school most attended by Haitians offered no sanctuary from negative judgments and the attending verbal and physical abuse. In the mid-1980s, when a group of Haitians performed a Haitian dance during a football pep rally, for example, they were booed off the stage. The words Haitian and 'boat people' became epithets among students. At times, prejudice was so extreme that some Haitian youth became 'cover ups' or 'undercovers', that is, they hid their Haitian heritage and tried to pass as Bahamians or as being from some other group, anything other than Haitian. Nevertheless, in some contexts Haitians, African Americans, and others in the same school did have positive relations. Here we describe two positive contexts, sports teams and a student heritage celebration.

<sup>9</sup> While the Miami Herald made an early and special effort to reach out to Miami Cubans, more generally the business community preferred to avoid directly confronting what they viewed as 'divisive' ethnic issues such as riots or massive refugee influxes. Instead, they concentrated on issues they understood and which they thought everyone could agree on, such as the need to foster economic development, improve the city's reputation, and fight crime and drugs. They created specialized organizations for each of these particular problems, including Miami Citizens Against Crime, Miami's for Me (to improve the image of Miami), Homes for South Florida and Greater Miami Neighborhoods (to increase and improve the stock of low income housing), the Miami Coalition Against Drugs and Business Against Drugs (initially known as BAD), and Tools for Change (to promote Black business development), Partners for Progress (to assist Black participation in the hospitality industry) and We Will Rebuild (in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew).

When Haitians first arrived in the early 1980s, they did not play American sports such as football and basketball. But by the late 1980s, the football and basketball teams at the high school attended by the most Haitians not only incorporated Haitians, but some of their Haitian players were stars. By the mid-1990s and beyond, several teams were overwhelmingly Haitian and many Haitian athletes earned college athletic scholarships. Moreover, the basketball coach claimed that the members of his team were blind to ethnicity. The team was a 'tight,' unified one. The players not only ate together, but they also associated in many other activities. Similar to the positive coach studied by Greenfield and colleagues (Greenfield *et al.* 2002) in Los Angeles, the African American coach of the football team in Miami went one step further. Not only did he integrate Haitians on an equal footing, but he also made a special effort to build ethnic self-esteem among his players. The coach told them that playing football should be accompanied with pride in being Haitian, the same message that he imparted to his African American players about their ethnic heritage. Similar to what Carlson and Lein (1997) argue, pride in ethnic identity helped produce positive inter-group relations. Thus, in Miami, Haitian football players assimilated to American behavior, yet the African American coach encouraged them to retain ethnic pride. As in the case of Anglo and Cuban business people, leadership is important. The coach set the conditions of equality under conditions of a shared goal, winning games.

Unity can also be accomplished while promoting multicultural activities. At a high school in Miami with a majority Haitian student body, which we call King High, a two-day cultural heritage festival was organized by a teacher with the vision to showcase the cultural heritage of the students who are almost all from the Caribbean islands. The cultural heritage festival was intended to be a showcase of the students' efforts to be appreciated by an audience of parents and community. When the project was proposed to students they immediately grasped the relevance of the project to their personal histories. Committees were formed to work on exhibits of different Caribbean Island nations with one teacher 'helper' for each committee.

One teacher observed: 'I mostly did the Bahamas work with the other students, regular education students, as opposed to Advanced Placement students; and I think they enjoyed it because everyone had some kind of cultural connection to the expo's theme.' 'In other words,' he continued: 'the work was actually relevant to their backgrounds and they were engaged. This wasn't removed from them at all. It gave them a sense of pride, cultural pride. So often they are taught to efface their culture and assimilate. Some kids don't want to get into their culture. They think, "That's Mom and Dad. That's old time." But even to their surprise, they really enjoyed it.' It was the regular students including those at high risk of academic failure who did the work. He said, 'I think a great benefit of the expo is that it is a useful way to teach research and reference skills.' We also learned that students from different ethnic backgrounds worked together on the exhibits. When we asked the students about working on the exhibits one boy replied that it gave them a chance to do something interesting. The exhibits were designed and constructed by the students and the only requirement was that the students must present their work. Teachers gave some free class time for the project and the school's media center allowed students' use of computers and printers because most students had no other access to these tools.

On the day of the Exposition at the entrance to the school, the school band of about 14 members enthusiastically performed a medley of Caribbean tunes and Bob Marley tributes. The exposition was set up in the media center where the sound of even more music created a festive feeling. Around the large room were elaborate and colorful displays representing the culture, history and arts of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Aruba, the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, Jamaica and one of the Taino, the indigenous peoples of the large island of Santo Domingo, which now is comprised of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Almost every island display had its own music issuing on a cassette player or as background to a power point presentation.

The displays featured and served foods typical of the each island and that were readily available in Miami. At the exhibit featuring the Dominican Republic, for example, students had prepared a flan pudding and punch made from orange juice, condensed milk, sugar, vanilla and cinnamon, while at the Jamaican display students were serving spiced bun, jerk seasoning, and pineapple and cream colas. Although the food and drink had been selected by the student committee to be offered to the audience, the ingredients were purchased out of pocket by the teacher advisors.

There were tables covered with transcribed interviews of fellow Haitian students and family members. Hanging off the front of these tables were Haitian proverbs that the students had written or typed with the proverb's English translations below them. They also provided hand drawn illustrations depicting the main thrust of the lesson that the proverb aimed to depart. One of them read, 'Fanm pou you tan y Manman pou tout tan,' with its related English translation 'wife for a time, mother for



all time.’ Another one read ‘woch nan dio pa konnen doule woch nan soley’ which translates to ‘the rock in the water does not know the pain of the rock in the sun.’ Each of the proverbs offered insight into the particularity of Haitian norms relative to mainstream American values.

At the back of one table was a poster relating Haiti’s demographic statistics and history. Next to that, was a poster on Haiti’s contemporary personalities, like popular R&B artists Usher Raymond and Hip Hop Artist and producer, Wycleff Jean. Further along the table were typed descriptions of Haitian foods and recipes. Some of these were hand written and probably retrieved from family members and friends. Behind this table was a poster hung against the wall entitled *Haitian Diaspora and Flags*. Some of the Haitian diaspora countries featured were Canada, France and the US. Under each of the flags featured, the students had pasted the real currency of the respective nations. Beside this poster was another that depicted Haiti’s revolution and featured a large illustration of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Haiti’s revolutionary hero. It also had illustrations of Haitians revolting on slave ships and fearless Haitian fighters in battle with the French on Haitian shores.

Although only two parents and no one from the community came to see the exposition, the entire media center was full of students and teachers. Students were positioned behind their respective exhibits sharing out food and drinks and negotiating the one-cup-rule of juice distribution. The students moved in packs from table to table, looking at the works of fellow students and sampling the cakes, buns, salsas and other foods. Aruba had an endless flow of students, largely due to their fruit punch, which was full of strawberries and watermelon. The climate was very upbeat and everyone was enjoying themselves.

The assistant principal of King High School related how excited the teachers were to see the efforts of the students and that when everything came together: ‘They could not believe the effort that everyone had put into the project’. She shared her pride in the way that the students had made every effort to research efficiently and have their products beautifully decorated. Face beaming with happiness, she said: ‘This was such a successful event, the kids need this.’ Another teacher who teaches English to recently arrived immigrant students told us: ‘I didn’t think that it was going to be such a positive turnout. I had students who couldn’t wait to do their assignments, some even worked on more than one island’.

This event was successful because the various factors of the contact hypothesis combined. The student exhibits demanded a collective effort on the part of students as well as the teachers who advised them. Students felt that they were all being treated equally and they all had a stake in the outcome. At the same time, one individual, a teacher, provided the leadership for the organization and thematic vision of the student exposition at King High School. Considering the demographics of this high school, the cultural connection that linked the students to this theme was particularly important in overcoming ethnic distrust and competition among them. As a result, these students responded with both academic and aesthetic flair. Students were able to be an appreciative audience of each others’ work on this central theme.

## Conclusions

Interethnic conflict is one of the most important threats to the stability of nation states and local communities throughout the world. Nevertheless, interethnic conflict is not inevitable and even when present can be ameliorated. The context of reception, *i.e.* how the dominant group treats those from other groups is perhaps the most important factor. If newcomers are treated well, they are much more likely to gain economic, social and political resources and integrate without conflict. When the dominant group treats newcomers poorly, conflict is likely to arise.

The extraordinarily positive reception accorded Cubans by the US federal government propels their economic and political success. On the other hand, the prejudice and discrimination confronted by Haitians presents a substantial barrier to their success. In spite of Haitians’ high aspirations and hard work, they remain one of the poorest groups not only in South Florida but nationwide. Context of reception undoubtedly is a major factor in the integration of international migrants.

Not only is an official welcoming context of reception important, but local leaders and institutions need to reach out in special ways to newcomer groups. Leaders and individuals from the locally dominant groups should recruit newcomers into organizations and institutions. And, they should assure that the newcomers participate equally, not as tokens, in activities that are important to both groups and which encourage cooperation rather than competition.

The GMCC’s efforts to incorporate Cuban businessmen as equals along with the Miami Herald’s

reaching out to Cubans in their own language, helped integrate the Cuban business community. Similarly, Haitian youth were integrated because some coaches, teachers and school administrators treated them equally in activities that required cooperation to succeed.

Yet, as the example at the beginning of this essay of the little boy, Elián, reflects, good relations are often precarious and can be reversed by a single dramatic event. The US government's sending Elián back to his father in Cuba generated tremendous tension and some conflict between Cubans and the broader community. Nearly 10 years later, relations between Cubans and Anglos had become smooth again, but the Elián event is a reminder of the fragility of interethnic relations and the need to both understand and direct attention to them.

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