

## **Venezuela: a country with a matricentric family model**

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#### Abstract

This article presents a view of the Venezuelan matricentric family, a reality which will continue for historical reasons. This widely unknown concept was experienced in real life and researched with the life histories methodology by Alejandro Moreno who lives for more than thirty years with a matricentric family in a low income community, (*barrio*).

The way it is perceived in western culture, a couple does not exist in the matricentric family model. The family exists without the father, it is a binomial mother-and-son relationship which acts as a solid unit. If this bond exists from early infancy violence can be prevented, when it is broken delinquency can be brutal.

Offering women wider spaces of economic and social participation will break the vicious circle of poverty and the matricentric family.

Key words: matricentric family, mother-son binomial bond, father inexistent, life histories, structured delinquents, violence,

Venezuela is a country with profound contrasts. The colonization from Spain not only in Venezuela but in all Latin America destroyed the native family patterns and it was not successful in the creation of a coherent family structure. The conquerors and their descendants lived a double bond in their sexual morality which in turn brought about two opposed family environments. The legitimate family and the illegitimate relationships. The couple and love cannot prosper if concubinage is predominant.

Since the year 1970 a group of Venezuelan researchers initiated a series of studies about the Venezuelan family. Four decades later (Vethencourt, J.L.2002 ) asserts that low income Venezuelan families - which is 80% of the population - is not consistent with the traditional nuclear model of father, mother and siblings. Family structure here is weak and atypical in a situation where partnership changes frequently and continuously, thus dissolving bonds soon after procreation.

The Venezuelan family is centered in the figure of the mother. It is exclusively formed by the mother and her sons. The father is not included, even though he may be physically present. This means that in a matricentric family men are practically absent from the family nucleus, they gravitate around several women , disregard their children and never settle down with one woman; therefore women take over almost the total responsibility of childrearing. In this way the mother constitutes the center of the emotional world of the Venezuelans.

Moreno, A. (2003) writes: "Pedro has 15 brothers. That he knows of...Seven of them share the same mother but not the same father; the other eight share the same father but not the same mother. From the same father and

the same mother he does not have a brother or sister. He is the only child, but that is not his family since the three of them have never lived together. The sixteen brothers and sisters are distributed in three family groups that the father common to all of them has created, yet to which they have never belonged”

Pedro represents a Venezuelan who emerges from the popular family , an icon whose story was published in Moreno, A ( 2002) *Buscando Padre* (Searching for a Father)

What one understands in western culture as a woman does not apply in the popular culture of Venezuela: . the mother is not a woman, she is only a mother;. and the man is not a man, he is only a son.

The world of the Venezuelans is the world of the mother.

The concept “matricentric “ has two characteristics: it is atypical and it has no structure. The concept was first described by Vethencourt , J.L. (1974) who studied men in Venezuelan prisons. He found that values, self esteem, dignity and friends are lost, only except one: the mother. The family circled around the mother, without the father’s significant presence.

Yet one should not confuse “ matricentric” with “matriarchy” . Contrary to the hypothesis of researchers such as Bachoffen (1987) and Reed( 1975) matriarchy has never existed.

A matriarchal society would have institutions which privilege women in positions of power. This has not yet been found.

Moreno, A. (1995; 2003) systematically studies life histories where he describes the life of each subject immersed in the society of his or her neighborhood ( *barrio* ) and he finds only two components: mothers and sons.

Structure is neither the mother, nor the son, structure is the mother-son relationship which exists.

Therefore there is no place for the father figure in a triangle. Strangely enough the metaphor of a circle specifies how the Venezuelan family is matricentric, yet it is still patriarchal. The mother occupies the center role in the family, but tangentially men occupy power positions.

Women's power is only emotional and this is role she is not willing to give up. She is not interested in the love of her partner, she is interested in the love of and lives for her son, to the extent the partner can become a threat to her emotional kingdom.

In order to preserve control the mother defends the matricentric family nurturing chauvinism ( "*machismo*" ) and sexual promiscuity in the upbringing of her son, so that he in turn should repeat with other women the same relationship her partner held with her.

This emotional monopoly which the mother has with her son is such that every time the son engages in new relationships, a family conflict arises.

Not only does the mother expel the father from the family, but she discourages a stable marital relationship of her son. Following this pattern also the daughter in law becomes uncomfortable for the Venezuelan mother, thus usually they do not live in harmony because she fears that her son will abandon her.

Her son belongs to her entirely. She only "lends" the son for a brief period of time and then returns him to the mother .Only after the man leaves, the daughter in law and the mother become close and friendly with each other . In this circumstance the daughter in law becomes also a mother who closes the emotional door to her husband, encouraging him to leave her sooner or later.

Besides Venezuela, there are other countries in the region where the matricentric family is prevalent, it occurs in the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal and some areas in the United States ( Shoumatoff, 1990) . A common denominator in all is the very impoverished and disintegrated areas.

The Venezuelan woman is resigned to take care of her children and live in poverty, thus her socio-economical expectations are not very high. On the other hand the man has high economic ambitions which estranges him even more from the family, since he recognizes that it would sink him deeper into poverty. Therefore if the matricentric family is the cause of poverty, it is also its consequence. Vethencourt,, J.L. (2002) considers the rise of the matricentric in Venezuela as a failure. He perceives it as an incoherent model with harmful repercussions to the psychological structure of the individuals and society.

Moreno, A. (1995) on the other hand states “our matricentric culture is not deplorable...women have siblings with different men and a history of continuous concubinages but they do not feel guilty, nor ashamed”.

The matricentric family is functional in the sense that since the woman does not have expectations from her partner, she does not miss his absence and she is able to construct a healthy emotional world with other alternatives, which are her sons.

The matricentric family is a a space for emotional stability, yet at the same time it is the cause and consequence of poverty, which in turn seriously damages the social structure.

“Our family does not exist. While we reconstruct the family, many generations will go by, therefore the State is the father. ( Navarro, H, Ministry of Education, 1999)

This quote is an example of how gender is perceived: women are the most important figure of the Venezuelan family, they are the only voice of authority ; while men have a bland and weak discipline, are submissive to their mother and they are excluded and isolated from the family. (Moreno, A. 1996)

It is clear that the matricentric family consists of the relationship mother-son. They are not two components but a solid unit. To establish a couple is not part of the model of the popular Venezuelan family . If it does occur, it is an exception. The family exists without the father. The father does not have place in the center of the family, he is only necessary for procreation, as an external instrument.

He remains as an outsider and may function occasionally as a satellite, but even this is not essential.

In the matricentric model the human being is a different person than the one which is desirable in occidental culture. In this other - so called modern culture - men strive toward self realization , autonomy and are capable to function on their own. In the Venezuelan popular culture each human being is structurally mother-son or mother-daughter . The daughter is perceived as a maternal body not as an erotic individuality. The son has a *macho* body .

From the anthropological point of view the matricentric model has functioned very well for a long time and will continue to do so.

Thus, to interpret that the Venezuelan is dependent and irresponsible would be an external category which disregards the historic and social reality.

And to say that the matricentric family model is dysfunctional, atypical and nonstructured is to view this phenomenon from the outside, comparing it to the other idealized family model which supposedly is universal.

However even though the relationship mother-son has no fissures, the son does have them. He is son-of-the-mother but not son-of-the-father- . The son has an internal hole: the absence of the father. He needs the father from a psychological point of view. This anthropological and cultural need so far has been frustrated.

Only recently, about fifteen years ago there is a new phenomenon where a young father holds his son in public and is not ashamed of showing his love. If this is maintained it would certainly create important changes in the popular family.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, analyzing the causes of epidemic violence there is an element which leads to produce violent delinquents in the classic triangular family when the father shows severe deficiencies.

In Venezuela the deficiencies occur because of the mother . Venezuelan violent structured delinquents lack maternal attention from very early infancy; this is experienced by them as violence, therefore later in life they practice insatiable violence unto others, imposing respect (*respeto*). All due to the abandonment of the mother-son profound bond.

When the mother-son experience is sufficiently satisfactory during the first years of life, later on the adolescent may incur in violence due the environment he lives in, but he is never fully identified with this behavior, and on the long run is able to separate from the world of delinquency.

In his latest book “ And we come forth to kill people” (“ Y Salimos a Matar...”Moreno, A.. 2007) describes delinquents as follows:

#### A) Structural Delinquents

Group 1 Up to 25 years of age. The younger they are -14 years old- the more prestige in the criminal world . They are the most anarchical . Killing and stealing is acted upon with crudeness and impunity.

There is no respect for anyone or anything, yet their main goal is to gain respect. The relationship with the mother is *“you are not important”* , *“you are worthless”* *“I don’t love you”*

Group 2 between 25 and 60 years

Group 3 after 60 years

These last 2 groups are more “modest” in their crimes, have more controls, and make agreements with the community for protection and cooperation

B) The Incidental Delinquent

Uses violence according to the circumstances, but on the long run regenerates in order to take care of the mother and/ or to avoid prison.

The main difference between A and B is the experience with the mother.

When there exists a capacity to share i.e. mother-and.-son living together the relationship is happy, open to understanding, pacific and opposed to violence.

Since this model will persist for historical and cultural reasons the best option is to offer women wide spaces in the economic ground in order to overcome poverty via employment and social participation.

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