

Learning from Hispanic Mentees: A Reflection on Cultural and Socioeconomic Differences

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The Experience

The Hispanic Newcomer Outreach Mentoring Program provides medical students at Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine the opportunity to be partnered with local Latinx children from Pontiac, Michigan in order to promote community relationships and health education.¹ This year-long program is structured around weekly phone calls as well as weekend health lessons and activities that bring the mentors and mentees together. We, the authors, quickly discovered a commonality with our mentees beyond our female gender: we are all the eldest children in our families. Over the past year, we grew closer to our mentees than we could have imagined. Initially, our phone calls focused primarily on school, but soon transformed into hour-long conversations about relationships, stressors, and aspirations. Through this mentoring program, we further developed our cultural humility and challenged our preconceptions by viewing the role of the eldest daughter through the lens of socioeconomic status, gender roles, and culture.

Dana's mentee, Arianna*, is 12 years old and the eldest daughter with three younger siblings. Mary's mentee, Lucia*, is 15 years old and the eldest daughter with four younger siblings. They are both responsible for cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, and taking care of their younger family members – like second mothers. In contrast to our experiences as the eldest daughters, our parents or nannies shouldered most of these chores during our childhoods. Due to their families' socioeconomic status, Arianna and Lucia assumed caretaking responsibilities at a much younger age than we did, causing them to fulfill roles that we will not experience until we have our own children. Research shows that socioeconomic challenges may result in an increase in childhood responsibility²; however, we were impressed with the maturity of our mentees when confronted with this reality.

Many socioeconomic barriers have recently been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and children have been particularly affected as a result of school shutdowns. For Arianna, homeschooling means that she frequently misses class because her Wi-Fi fails, and she has a hard time focusing on homework because she lacks a quiet workspace due to her siblings playing in the background. For Lucia, online school means juggling the responsibilities of caring for her infant sister and ensuring that her other siblings focus on their schoolwork while simultaneously trying to attend her online classroom and completing her own assignments. This mandatory online learning also impacted the mentoring program; therefore, novel solutions were implemented in order to maintain an educational, yet fun, learning experience.³ Due to COVID-19, children from lower socioeconomic groups face

disproportionate barriers in education such as lack of reliable internet and access to appropriate books, thereby further intensifying educational inequalities.⁴

The nuances of gender roles within a culture are an integral part of identity that can have a long-lasting influence on education and career opportunities.⁵ Some of the differences in gender roles between our families and our mentees' were evident in Arianna's experiences. For example, Arianna is often asked to help with cleaning and other chores while her brother is not, allowing him to start on homework or play outside. In contrast, while acknowledging the variability in gender roles within Western culture, our parents had similar expectations for all their children. Although this dichotomy in gender roles was observed, potentially due to cultural expectations, it cannot be extrapolated to all Mexican families due to the significant variability within their culture.⁵ Despite these traditional gender roles, Arianna studies diligently and maintains her extracurricular interests so that she can achieve her goals.

Developing close relationships with our mentees allowed us to deepen our own cultural humility. Cultural humility is a life-long, fluid process of self-reflection and critique in the pursuit of learning about one's own culture and new cultures driven by curiosity.⁶ For example, Lucia's mentor encouraged her to ask her siblings to help with housework to allow more time for her to study or talk with friends; however, Lucia refused because she did not want to inconvenience her younger siblings. This brief interaction revealed that Lucia was unlikely to accept suggestions if they were too far outside her norm. Learning from interactions like these, we have tried to provide advice that could be beneficial to our mentees while still being sensitive to their personal preferences and cultural norms. Providing culturally-centered care is a skill that, with practice, can become habitual and promote patient involvement in decision making.⁷⁻⁸ As future physicians, this year-long relationship helped us develop skills in communicating with people from cultural backgrounds different from our own.

In our medical school training, we have learned about the negative impact of implicit bias as well as the benefit of contact theory which argues that interaction with people from different backgrounds can help diminish stereotypes.⁹ This mentoring program provides the opportunity to challenge previous biases so that, once aware of it, we can actively work to diminish negative stereotypes. By building a relationship with our mentees, we were able to better understand them as individuals and broaden our perspectives.

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As the eldest daughters, we all love our siblings and try to guide them; however, we have different responsibilities which is due, at least in part, to our socioeconomic, cultural, and gender role differences. Although we have learned about the effects of socioeconomic disparities and culture in class, witnessing them in our mentees' lives has challenged us to reevaluate the impact they might have in the everyday lives and viewpoints of our future patients. The development of these insights highlights the importance of similar long-term

experiences for all medical students. Our mentees have transformed our perspectives as medical students and mentors, evolved our cultural humility, and will positively impact our future practice as physicians.

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