

Embracing Complexity: Fostering Latinx Health Equity with Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

In this article, I delve into the unique aspects of the Latinx community in the US and Puerto Rico, emphasizing the significance of social determinants of health (SDOH). As a Colombian American immigrant, I highlight the need to expand SDOH frameworks beyond traditional boundaries, accounting for cultural dynamics, immigration effects, and shared narratives. Drawing from my collaboration with a national foundation client, I highlight the importance of their work to develop a Latinx Child and Family Wellbeing framework, integrating elements such as family unification and immigration narratives. This article underscores the importance of strategies that are comprehensive and tailored to strive for genuine health equity for the Latinx community.

Introduction

I would be incomplete in my analysis if I didn't start by delving into my own experiences navigating the immigration landscape from various angles. My entry into the United States as a political refugee during the post-9/11 era turned into a seven-year period of life in the shadows as an undocumented immigrant, awaiting asylum that never materialized. I now recognize that the definition of "health" for our family during times filled with fears of family separation, persecution, and the dissolution of the "American Dream" transcended the definition of medical well-being. For us, health meant having food on our table, keeping our family united, securing jobs (not careers), and the mere chance of surviving another day in a land that was seen as "relatively safer."

As I look back today, having journeyed from being an "Undocumented Immigrant to an Ivy League Graduate" while navigating an unconventional path to "success," I realize that my personal definition of health has consistently evolved alongside the formation of my Colombian-American narrative. This drives me to question how we can authentically support our communities if we neglect to understand parts of their journey and the myriad of experiences that their unique spectrum encompasses.

When we look at the unique needs of the incredibly diverse Latinx population in the United States and Puerto Rico, we must understand the true impact of social determinants of health (SDOH). We need to comprehend the ripple effects of overlooking these determinants, which disproportionately affect our community. As a Colombian American immigrant, I can't claim to

grasp the experiences of all 60+ million Latinos in the US. The reality is that a community as diverse as Latino, Latinx, or Hispanic should never be understood or evaluated through the same lens as other vulnerable groups.

In my years in the social impact realm, particularly in the Social Determinants of Health domain, I've noticed a potential pitfall: focusing too much on “best practices” might lead us to miss interventions or “promising practices” that truly resonate with our unique needs. Similarly, if we're not careful, the term “SDOH” could become a mere buzzword. To avoid this, we need to broaden our understanding of SDOH beyond the traditional framework. While economic stability, education access, healthcare equity, access to food, and community context are key, our framework must also encompass cultural nuances, the impact of immigration, and the weight of our shared narrative.

In partnership with a national foundation, I played a role in shaping their Latinx Child and Family Well-being framework over the last three years. This framework emerged in response to the devastating effects of family separation policies at the U.S.-Mexico border and is an unprecedented data landscape analysis, centering the voices of Latinx families navigating social safety net systems. Driven by an SDOH lens, this framework aims to understand the unique needs of Latinx children and families and provide effective recommendations to advance health equity.

What resonated most with me about this project, apart from its unique understanding-first approach, was the focus on the SDOH lens. It courageously includes components like family unification and immigration policy narratives. To truly understand the collective trauma our community faces, we must delve into the impact of family separation and the subsequent mental health consequences. It's equally crucial to acknowledge how restrictive immigration policies and hurtful narratives deeply affect the Latinx community, demanding solutions that nurture our overall health and well-being.

Frameworks like SDOH are vital for comprehending the well-being of marginalized communities beyond medical care. However, it's imperative to dig deeper and connect the dots between race, ethnicity, and systemic racism that perpetuates health inequity. Initiatives like this foundation's intentional framework are not just needed; they're vital at decision-making levels, ensuring intersectionality is a core consideration in every strategy, policy, and decision. Lessons from my journey underscore these points:

1. **Understanding Diversity:** Foundations can and should take the time to understand better the unique experiences of a group as diverse as that identified as Latinx, Latino, or Hispanic and the complexity of our experiences and identities.
2. **Inclusive Lens:** A broad lens like SDOH enables us to capture the full spectrum of Latinx needs beyond traditional child welfare perspectives. The cross-sector and diverse group of individuals that made up the core team was, in fact, an example of how this process was addressing gaps as we went.
3. **Meaningful Partnerships:** Collaborating with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and Family Resource Centers (FRCs) requires a relational approach, valuing their

perspectives and investing in their relationships with the community. Prioritizing their relationship with the community they serve, respectfully reimbursing their overhead costs/administrative time, and intentionally creating avenues to hear THEIR systemic challenges in addition to the lived experiences of their constituents are all examples of how to show up with community partners meaningfully.

4. **Holistic Analysis:** Employing a multi-sector analysis helps us appreciate the Latinx ecosystem in its entirety. We must not only focus on social sector needs but also highlight the strengths and opportunities for growth in areas like business, philanthropy, government, etc.
5. **Amplifying Voices:** Prioritizing the voices of lived experience and incorporating those voices into the process fosters more impactful solutions. All voices and perspectives are valid and important. However, prioritizing and highlighting the voices of lived experience is the only way to ensure that nothing about us is done without us.
6. **Utilizing Data:** Moreover, it's vital to recognize emerging resources that have the potential to impact our endeavors profoundly. The forthcoming [UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute Data Hub](#) stands out as one of these invaluable resources. The Data Hub's commitment to offering comprehensive insights into the well-being of Latinos in California and Florida is a significant stride forward. Aligned with the direction of strategic initiatives in the field, the impending launch of the UCLA Data Hub holds the promise of enriching our strategies with robust data and diverse perspectives. This advancement builds upon the trajectory set by collaborative efforts that aim to foster Latinx well-being and equity.

In conclusion, this article aims to spark interest and curiosity in stepping outside of the box, even when that box seems innovative. Our interventions, initiatives, and strategies must be tailored to the communities we aim to elevate. Learning from nimble and flexible approaches that co-create solutions with the community they impact is imperative. My hope is that we don't end up perpetuating the very same systems we are trying to dismantle by applying the same lens for all groups. We can and should do better.