

## **Theory of Social Inequality**

When thinking about the experiences I've had with social inequality, it's almost a blur. I grew up in a community where it was normal to be hustling and having 10+ family members living in a two-bedroom apartment. The community that I was raised in looked like me and spoke the same language as me, there wasn't anything that I couldn't relate to.

My family made the sacrifices of living their life behind in Mexico to give a better future to us, that was always reminded in case we forgot. I had suffered a great loss and was sexually molested at a young age, that affected my well-being, my academics, and the first time I had to meet with a psychiatrist at age 11. The schools that I attended had no clue that I was receiving professional help nor the trauma that I have gained. I did not have someone at school to speak with and at that time, having a therapist and a psychiatrist was greatly stigmatized, especially in the Latinx community.

At that age and as I grew older, I began to idealize the idea of death and found myself resentful of the world. Unfortunately in the Latinx community it has become "normal" for family members to be inappropriate with their family. Once I reached high school I was slowly understanding the importance of my well-being and how I had let my symptoms develop greatly. My school had only one counselor for 300 students and the sessions only ran from 25-30 minutes every two weeks or every week if there's space. For schools and higher institutions to not have a support network or available resources can hinder the academic performance of the student along with their well-being. My school would prioritize that the basketball team had enough money to afford uniforms without giving it a second thought on cutting the arts & fuse budget. The arts & fuse department was a space where students were able to be creative and speak their emotions through art. "Social support has been found to buffer against the adverse effects of potentially traumatic events ,(PTEs), reducing the risk for mental health problems." (Katie M. Howard Sharp et al. 2017) If I had the support that I needed when I was younger, then I could have prevented the disorders that I have today that make it an everyday challenge.

Coming to Clark with multiple mental disorders was a challenge, given I had an episode my sophomore year which resulted in me being admitted into psych. After being discharged and allowed back on campus, the resources that they had available made me question how what they had to offer just was not enough nor was it suitable for the counseling that I needed. Yet, because Clark University did not have the resources that I, and probably other students, needed; I would not have developed the more disorders that I have today.

Karen Oehme et al. (2019) examine how having prevention resilience programs to complement mental health services can help college students overcome their challenges and struggles. "Researchers have emphasized the critical importance of social support and relationships in the lives of young adults. This program reminds students at multiple junctures about the benefits of a sense of belonging to the university and feeling connected to other students..." (Karen Oehme et al. (2019) My social inequality was the lack of resources that Clark should have had to offer, not only to me but to every student. I am proud of how far I have come from and how I have handled my academic career and well-being. 11 year old me would be proud of how vocal and confident I have become, expressing to the world and higher education institutions how important it is to demand support networks and resources for students like me to have.

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### **Positionality and Identity**

“You’re not Puerto Rican! You don’t even look like a true Boricua.” my classmates yelled letting me know that I have no right to identify myself being half Puerto Rican. My third grade Puerto Rican teacher would stare and nod her head agreeing to what the rest of the class were shouting. Not having enough cultural knowledge because my dad was not around made it even harder to try to connect with my Puerto Rican heritage. Even when I tried to teach myself the culture and try the different foods, I would catch myself asking “Who am I trying to be? Why am I trying to be someone I’m not?”. I wanted to prove to my school, teacher, and myself that boricua blood runs through my veins. So growing up in an area like the South Bronx where it’s flooded with Boricuas and Dominicans, it made it harder for me to identify as half Puerto Rican since there was so much I didn’t know.

I was a young girl trying to identify myself and trying to figure out what box I should mark off when filling in my New York State Exams. Throughout the years of elementary school having to only mark off the Mexican box and not the Puerto Rican box, was an annual ache that I felt not knowing which community to belong to. As I grew older over the years I’ve learned to reconnect with my Puerto Rican culture in a way that does not make me feel like I have to prove to someone else what I am. I’ve learned to navigate where I live by being more curious and taking the risk of being rejected by the Puerto Rican community. I’ve tried to see in the way of taking the responsibility to learn about my background and heritage because I am surrounded by it every day.

I never had someone to talk to at school or couseouling, which did affect the way I was treated by school faculty and my classmates. I believe that if I had some sort of support group that the school offered, I would have felt more comfortable being a student at my school and feel confident enough to belong there. Noelle M Hurd et al. (2018) focused on how having a pre-existing social network can help reduce any possible symptoms of depression and anxiety. Many students do suffer from stress due to personal issues and academic work. Oftentimes, college faculty forgets that college students are under a lot of pressure and are more likely to prioritize their academic work over their well-being. Which should encourage higher education to have support networks and resources available and accessible for students, specifically first-generation students.

Although my journey of knowing what to identify myself as, was when I was in elementary school, transitioning into higher education did make me question my identity again. There was a support network for students like me, first-generation students, yet it was not as consistent as it could have been. I also found myself very hesitant in participating in those support groups because of the division between international Latinx students and domestic Latinx students. “Research shows that first-generation college students are less likely to seek out help and show lower use of on-campus support services.” (McKneena et al. 2020).

Not only through these support networks do students build a community to lean on and reach out to for help, but it creates friendships and bonds. When transiting into college, it can get very lonely and you look for friendships to eat with for lunch. Reynold’s (2007) research discusses how friendships tend to develop when they are of the ethnic background and can potentially prevent social disorders and other illnesses. “The concept of social capital is useful in capturing the essence of friendship networks... Friendships generate wider social contacts and networks, which may also benefit individuals. (Reynolds, 2007) Illustrates how creating a social support network for students can benefit the individual's transition into higher education.

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### **Theory of Change**

The areas of interest that I want to focus on are specifically the Hispanic/Latino community in terms of addressing how the college institutions handle the challenges of the well-being of students. Focusing on this group will allow me to see if other first-generation students have felt or experienced what I did in higher education. Latinos born in the US have been categorized as lazy, rapist, drug dealers and other stereotypes placed amongst Latinos in general. Being a Latina born in the US has been difficult, being a student at a predominantly white institution and being afraid of the resources that are offered in higher education. It makes it harder to want to ask for help and seek out those resources that we need.

Stebbleton et al. (2014) discussed how “We found that first-generation students were less likely than their non-first-generation peers to seek out campus mental health services even though they were aware that they needed to use the services.” (Stebbleton et al. 2014). I believe that if higher education institutions have suitable and accessible support networks for first-generation students, students will have more of a sense of belonging in the school that they chose to commit to. They will be more encouraged to go and seek help when needed because of the comfortability that they have built and find the importance of their well-being.

Being a student at Clark University these past four years has been very exhausting, being first-generation student and balancing that out with my well-being. My experience with my well-being and how Clark handled it, was nowhere near the best way to handle it. For this, I would worry about the many other Latino students that go through this and if Clark handled it the way they did with me. I worry that my position and experience will cloud my judgment in a way that I would become bias when it comes to collecting data. Not everyone has the same experience that I have, but I do want to hear other experiences that students have had with support networks available for students.

My positionality will help me communicate with other students like me to speak on what they're going through and feeling comfortable enough to be vulnerable. Seeing someone and hearing their story can spark a bond and give them a sense of belonging knowing they're not alone. “marginalized groups in society, same-ethnic friendship networks have the potential to create community and group consciousness, which may in turn encourage social and political mobilization.” (Reynolds, 2007)

My passion really is to make people feel seen and heard, in the aspect of their well-being. Mental health is something that starts off as invisible and when it gets to the point where it begins to physically hurt the body, that is when people start to notice. It is something that is unseen and it is very stigmatized where being resilient is a “good thing” no one has to go through so many hardships or have trauma for them to be “strong”. Mental health and the well-being of first-generation students is a group I identified with in higher education, but for the long run I want to expand to everyone.

Before the pandemic, everyone mostly got their information and news off of social media or the internet rather than a newspaper. The type of work that I want to do is share my experience living with mental illnesses and letting people know that it is okay to prioritize your well-being. Being a first-generation student in predominantly white institutions can be intimidating, wanting to not show any signs of weakness or needing help. Stuck between the battle of wanting to be the first in your family to graduate college, making them proud, but also not at the expense of your well-being. My theory on social change is by sharing my experiences across social media

because that is what I have been doing since my sophomore year at Clark. I realized that from all the hardships and trauma that I have and had overcome, something good has to come out from it. I have to be that person that I once needed when I was younger to make me feel less alone and understand the feelings and emotions that are unseen be seen.

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