

April 2007

The Role of Relationships in the Professional Formation of Physicians

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Recommended Citation

Citation Information: Haidet, Paul MD, MPH; Hatem, David S. MD; Stein, Howard PhD; Fecile, Mary Lynn PhD, MD; Haley, Heather-Lyn A. PhD; Kimmel, Barbara MS; Mossbarger, David MS; and Inui, Thomas S. MD, ScM, "The Role of Relationships in the Professional Formation of Physicians" (2007).

DigitalCommons@The Texas Medical Center, Advances in Teaching and Learning Day, *Advances in Teaching and Learning Day Abstracts*. Paper 20.

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BACKGROUND: Studies of the professional development of physicians highlight the important effect that the learning environment, or "hidden curriculum," has in shaping student attitudes, behaviors, and values. We conducted this study to better understand the role that relationships have in mediating these effects of the hidden curriculum.

METHODS: We randomly recruited one 2nd- and one 4th-year student from each of five medical schools (Baylor, Indiana Univ, Univ of Massachusetts, Univ of Oklahoma, and Univ of Texas Medical Branch) during the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006. One interviewer at each school conducted a face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured interview with each student. The interviewers used a method called "life-space diagramming" to direct the student to draw a picture of all of the relationships in his/her life that had an influence on the sort of doctor that each student saw him/herself becoming. All of the interviewers then used a discussion guide designed to foster the student's elaboration and storytelling about the meaning of the relationships drawn on the life-space diagram. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Audiotapes of interviews were transcribed and entered into Atlas.ti for data management. In our ongoing analysis, we are using an iterative process of individual reading and group discussion (approximately 15 hours of group discussion thus far), and a narrative framework that focuses on elements of the students' life stories (e.g., setting, characters, plot, etc.) to approach our data.

RESULTS: Twenty students (ten each 2nd- and 4th year, nine female) completed data collection. Our team has analyzed ten students' data to date. These students' life-space diagrams demonstrate complex "webs" of relationships that shape students' evolving identities, goals, motivation, aspirations, and views toward what they should "be like" as future doctors. Some of the relationship-oriented themes in students' stories include control, competition, collaboration, variability and uncertainty (both within and across relationships), perseverance, and a dichotomy between relationships "inside" and "outside" the medical school. As an example of this last theme, one 2nd year student described how she felt herself changing (for the worse) and the important stabilizing effect of her family: "I can't put my finger on it, but something happens to you when you go through med school and it's nice to have people outside of it that can keep you grounded. I'm the person I am because of it, and I would probably be way worse off if I didn't have that in my life."

CONCLUSIONS: Students proceed through medical school embedded in complex webs of relationships that exert a powerful influence (both positive and negative) on their formation as physicians. In our presentation, we will provide an in-depth description of one student's relationships and stories as an exemplar of this influence. Educational interventions that foster adoption of professional values need to acknowledge the influence of relationships, and attempt to harness and shape their effects.