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Culture, Language, and the Doctor-Patient Relationship

Warren J. Ferguson, MD; Lucy M. Candib, MD

**Background:** This review’s goal was to determine how differences between physicians and patients in race, ethnicity, and language influence the quality of the physician-patient relationship. **Methods:** We performed a literature review to assess existing evidence for ethnic and racial disparities in the quality of doctor-patient communication and the doctor-patient relationship. **Results:** We found consistent evidence that race, ethnicity, and language have substantial influence on the quality of the doctor-patient relationship. Minority patients, especially those not proficient in English, are less likely to engage empathic response from physicians, establish rapport with physicians, receive sufficient information, and be encouraged to participate in medical decision making. **Conclusions:** The literature calls for a more diverse physician workforce since minority patients are more likely to choose minority physicians, to be more satisfied by language-concordant relationships, and to feel more connected and involved in decision making with racially concordant physicians. The literature upholds the recommendation for professional interpreters to bridge the gaps in access experienced by non-English speaking physicians. Further evidence supports the admonition that “majority” physicians need to be more effective in developing relationships and in their communication with ethnic and racial minority patients.

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Over the course of the last decade, disparities in health outcomes among ethnic minority and racial groups have become increasingly clear. Differences include access to care, screening, diagnostic and treatment interventions, and morbidity and mortality. According, the US government set goals for narrowing these differences, first for the year 2000 and now for the year 2010. While the reasons for these disparities remain poorly understood, calls for cultural competency training in medical school and residency, as well as efforts to recruit a more diverse medical workforce, suggest that aspects of the doctor-patient relationship may be important causative factors.

Research on doctor-patient communication has generated considerable evidence that effective communication can improve outcome measures such as patient satisfaction, adherence to treatment, and disease outcomes. Provision of adequate information, elicitation of patient worries, and a participatory decision-making style have all correlated with improved effectiveness. However, apart from an occasional reference to socioeconomic status, the literature on the doctor-patient relationship has not addressed the influence of cultural difference between physicians and patients on communication effectiveness. Additionally, appropriate care of ethnically and racially diverse populations requires the ability to communicate with individuals who have limited English proficiency. Only 25% of the important investigations on doctor-patient relationships have considered non-English-speaking patients.

We examined the literature on doctor-patient communication and culture, looking for recommended strategies for improving the doctor-patient relationship. In this literature, several themes stand out: approaches to language barriers; the recognition of physician bias, including racism; and relationship building. The latter includes the ability to use empathy and foster trust. It also includes effective communication skills to facilitate participatory decision making with patients and the provision of culturally competent care.

The goal of this review is answer three questions: (1) Is there evidence that differences in language, ethnicity, and race between physicians and patients affect the quality of their relationship and communication, and if so, are there outcome measures to substantiate such an effect? (2) Is there evidence that improv-

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Five studies were identified that showed a correlation between LES ability of patients and perceived quality of outcomes in comparison to English-speaking patients. The results are summarized in Table 1. Four of these studies measured quality by surveying patients. For example, one survey of Hispanics in Arizona regarding health status, access barriers, and care satisfaction showed that language of interview was a more significant variable than ethnicity.15 Three other studies surveyed patients following medical encounters, reporting on differences in satisfaction, provision of information, and compliance.16–18

The study by Baker17 was unique in that he surveyed 467 patients from one of three groups: those interviewed in English, those interviewed with an ad hoc interpreter, and a third group interviewed with no interpreter despite a patient’s report that one was needed. Those who used ad hoc interpreters or who went without a needed interpreter indicated that providers were less friendly, less respectful, and less concerned. For those needing an interpreter but not using one, these findings were magnified. These patients were also less satisfied with time spent by provider and with interpersonal aspects of care. Another emergency room study with pediatric patients demonstrated that children with LES parents had longer, more-costly visits with more testing due to the inability to communicate with parents.19

Table 2 summarizes those studies examining language concordance between a physician and patient and methods to bridge language difference. Three studies of Spanish-speaking Latino patients observed a correlation between doctor-patient language concordance and quantifiable outcomes. For example, Latino patients with a chronic condition (asthma) and cared for by a language-concordant physician asked more questions, had greater recall of recommendations, had lower use of the emergency room, and had more compliance with follow-up care.20 In another study of a homogeneous population, poor, LES Spanish-speaking Hispanics with a language-concordant physician had more information recall and asked more questions of their physicians than those cared for by an English-speaking physician.21 A stratified random analysis of Latino and Caucasian patients with diabetes and hypertension from the Medical Outcomes Study found a correlation between physical function and better well-being when the primary care physician spoke the same language.22

Four studies have focused on outcome measures with interpretation methods. In the first study (not included in Table 2), physician and patient satisfaction with interpretation methods were surveyed using a Likert scale developed by the authors. Validity and reliability testing of the instrument were not reported. Both physicians and patients were most satisfied with professional interpreters. Patients, but not physicians, were satisfied with use of a family member or with use of a bilin-
gual physician colleague. Physicians, but not patients, were satisfied with interpretation by telephone.\textsuperscript{23}

The second study was a randomized study of 49 post-partum visits that compared two types of professional interpretation: proximate-consecutive (typically performed in the triadic interview with a patient, physician, and interpreter) and remote-simultaneous (the form of simultaneous translation used in the United Nations with special technology). The remote type of interpretation was judged to be superior in many ways. Patient and physician utterances were both increased using the remote method. There were 12\% fewer inaccuracies of words spoken by physicians and 13\% fewer inaccuracies of words spoken by patients. Both patients and physicians preferred the remote method, although interpreters preferred the proximate method.\textsuperscript{24}

In a third study, use of health services and preventive screening exams was studied in four health maintenance organization practice sites prior to and following the addition of professional interpreters to on-site staff. Retrospective record review, after the intervention, revealed that patients with limited English proficiency had more office visits and increased use of prescription drugs, as well as increased numbers of rectal exams, flu vaccines, and fecal occult blood testing. However, there was no statistical change in use of mammography, PAP testing, or physical breast exam.\textsuperscript{25}

One study other demonstrated that even professional interpretation might have its limitations. A cross-sectional sample of patients was videotaped during visits with physicians in a multi-ethnic university clinic. English-speaking patients made almost three times as

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**Table 1**

Results of Outcome Studies With LES Versus ES Patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDY POPULATION</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Study Type</th>
<th>Covariates</th>
<th>Outcome Measure</th>
<th>Results*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirkman-Liff et al,\textsuperscript{19} 1991</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Socioeconomic</td>
<td>Health status</td>
<td>LES &lt; ES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David and Rhee,\textsuperscript{19} 1998</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>Cases=57 Controls=47</td>
<td>ES (controls) versus LES (cases)</td>
<td>Outpatient internal medicine clinic</td>
<td>No control for measures of education or socioeconomic status</td>
<td>MD explanation</td>
<td>LES &lt; ES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker,\textsuperscript{17} 1998</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>ED</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Age, gender, literacy, health status, anticipated satisfaction</td>
<td>MD friendliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrasquillo et al,\textsuperscript{15} 1999</td>
<td>2,333</td>
<td>ES=47 LES=41</td>
<td>ES (controls) versus LES (cases)</td>
<td>Five EDs</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income, insurance status, chief complaint, urgency, having primary MD</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampers et al,\textsuperscript{19} 1999</td>
<td>2,467</td>
<td>LB=30 months No LB=36 months</td>
<td>209 children with LB for family/MD 2,258 children with no LB for family/MD</td>
<td>ED</td>
<td>Prospective cohort study</td>
<td>Race, ethnicity, insurance, MD level, triage category</td>
<td>Length of time in ED Total ED test charges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ED—emergency department, ES—English speaking, LB—language barrier, LES—limited English speaking, MD—physician, nLB—no language barrier, NR—not reported, NS—nonsignificant

* The following results were all significant with P < .05 or lower. LES = ES scores or measures lower with limited English-speaking patients compared to English-speaking patients; LB > nLB = amount larger for families with language barrier than families with no language barrier.
### Table 2

**Strategies That Improve Outcomes With LES Patients**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Mean Age (Years)</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Study Type</th>
<th>Covariates</th>
<th>Outcome Measure</th>
<th>Results*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manson, 1988</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Spanish-speaking Latinos with asthma ± bilingual MD</td>
<td>Retrospective audit</td>
<td>Age, gender, Payer status, Disease severity</td>
<td>For patients &gt; 8 visits; LC &lt; LD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seijo et al, 1991</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>All patients Hispanic; poor to fair English; low socioeconomic status; n=24, visit with bilingual, bicultural MD n=27, visit with monolingual MD</td>
<td>General medical clinic</td>
<td>Cross-sectional observation</td>
<td>Homogenous population</td>
<td>Patient information recall; Patient question-asking behavior</td>
<td>LC &gt; LD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hornberger et al, 1996</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>49 SS mothers with infants</td>
<td>Well baby clinic</td>
<td>Randomized intervention using two interpretation methods</td>
<td>Homogenous sample</td>
<td>MD utterances, Mother utterances, Interpreter errors, MD satisfaction, Patient satisfaction</td>
<td>RS &gt; PC, RS &gt; PC, RS &gt; PC, RS &gt; PC, RS &gt; PC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacobs, 2001</td>
<td>4,380</td>
<td>ISG=46, CG=43</td>
<td>327 LES Spanish and Portuguese, 4,053 CG</td>
<td>HMO practice sites</td>
<td>Retrospective chart review</td>
<td>Gender, Age, Income, Years enrolled</td>
<td>Office visits, Rx written, Rx filled, Phone calls, Urgent care visits, Mammograms, Breast exams, Pap tests, FOB testing, Rectal exams, Flu vaccines</td>
<td>LES &gt; CG, LES &gt; CG, LES &gt; CG, NS, NS, NS, NS, NS, NS, NS, NS, NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivadeneira, 2000</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19 ES: 15 female, 19 SS: 17 male,</td>
<td>University clinic</td>
<td>Cross-sectional observation</td>
<td>Education level, Ethnicity</td>
<td># of verbal offers by patients, Patient-centered scores of MDs</td>
<td>SS &lt; ES (.6 versus 1.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A—attending, C—Caucasian, CA—Central American, CG—control group, CH—Chicano, ED—emergency department, ES—English speaking, FOB—fetal occult blood, IM—internal medicine, ISG—interventional study group, MD=physician, LC—language concordant, LD—language discordant, LES—limited English speaking, M—Mexican, NP—nurse practitioner, NR—not reported, NS—nonsignificant, PC—proximate consecutive interpretation, R—resident, RN—registered nurse, RS—remote spontaneous interpretation, SS—Spanish speaking

* The following results were all significant with P < .05 or lower. LC > LD = language concordant higher than language discordant; LC < LD = language concordant lower than language discordant; RS > PC or RS < PC = remote spontaneous interpretation higher or lower than proximate consecutive interpretation; SS < ES = scores with Spanish speakers less than English speakers; LES > CG = intervention with limited English-speaking rates higher than control group.
many offers of information. Spanish-speaking patients were less likely to receive facilitation from physicians and were more likely to have their comments ignored despite the presence of a professional interpreter. We could not find any studies that measured outcomes of training providers in the use of interpreters.

Evidence of Physician Bias

Table 3 summarizes those studies that either directly or indirectly examine stereotyping and bias in physician-patient interactions. The most direct evidence of such physician bias comes from a study of 618 post-angiogram visits performed by mostly Caucasian physicians with Caucasian and African American patients. Eight New York hospitals participated in the study. The authors surveyed physicians’ perceptions of and attitudes toward patients, focusing on patients’ personal and psychosocial characteristics, behavior, and likely role demands. They studied whether these perceptions or attitudes were affected by patient race or socioeconomic status as independent variables. Physicians were somewhat less likely to have a positive perception of African Americans on a number of issues. Physicians rated African Americans as less likely to be the kind of person they could be friends with, as being less likely to be free of substance abuse problems, and less likely than Caucasians to be interested in an active lifestyle and cardiac rehabilitation. Finally, physicians rated African Americans as less intelligent and less educated than Caucasians. All of these relationships were stronger if the patient was from a lower socioeconomic class.

Additional indirect evidence of racial bias emerged from studies comparing pain treatment for long-bone fractures in emergency departments for Caucasians versus Hispanics and Caucasians versus African Americans. Studies in Los Angeles revealed that Hispanic males were half as likely to receive analgesia despite equivalent estimates of pain intensity by both physicians and patients. The same authors performed a retrospective review of African Americans and Caucasians with long-bone fractures in Atlanta. Blacks had a
Table 4

Studies on Relationship Building, With Race and Ethnicity As Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Study Population</th>
<th>Mean Age (Years)</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Study Type</th>
<th>Controls</th>
<th>Outcome Measure</th>
<th>Results*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooper-Patrick, 40 1999</td>
<td>1,816 All &gt; 18</td>
<td>784 C patients 814 AA patients 36 C MDs 16 AA MDs 10 Asian MDs 2 Latino MDs</td>
<td>IPA: 32 internal medicine and family practices</td>
<td>Telephone survey</td>
<td>Age, gender, education, marital status, self-reported health, length of MD-patient relationship</td>
<td>Participatory decision-making style</td>
<td>C and AA patients with C MD Race Concordant versus discordant relationships</td>
<td>AA &lt; C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaplan, 41 1995</td>
<td>8,316 46.5 78.3% non-minority 21.7% minority 61.3% female 19.6% report fair or poor health 193 general internist MD 92 family physicians</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>Secondary analysis of MOS</td>
<td>MD age, gender, specialty, ethnicity, practice type, geography</td>
<td>Patient age, gender, education, ethnicity, health status</td>
<td>Participatory decision-making style</td>
<td>Minority score &lt; non-minority MD Majority patients with minority versus non-minority MD MD &lt; non-minority MD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* The following results are statistically significant at P<.05 or lower. C > AAC AA=measure higher/lower for Caucasians than African American patients. C > H/C < H=measure higher/lower for Caucasians than Hispanic patients. M > C=effect higher for minority than for Caucasian patients. RD × RC=race discordant scores lower than race concordant scores.
by physicians also correlated with patient satisfaction. This trend was enhanced when there was gender concordance as well. A secondary analysis of the Medical Outcomes Study, a 4-year longitudinal observational exploration, assessed participatory decision-making styles of physicians with both minority and non-minority patients. Minority patients on average rated physicians lower than non-minority patients. Interestingly, however, minority patients scored non-minority physicians somewhat higher than minority physicians. While the results were statistically significant (P<.05), we point out that score differences were small.

We could not identify any studies that examined improvements in physician communication as a result of training. In contrast, there is growing evidence that training of patients to be more assertive is an effective strategy to improve doctor-patient communication.

Discussion

This review provides evidence that race, ethnicity, and language all affect the quality of the doctor-patient relationship. Minority patients, especially those not proficient in English, are less likely to engage empathetic responses from physicians, less likely to establish rapport with physicians, less likely to receive sufficient information, and less likely to be encouraged to participate in medical decision making. These characteristics have all been linked to patient satisfaction, patient compliance, and care outcomes in the general literature on the doctor-patient relationship. Some of the literature also validates calls for a more diverse physician workforce, since minority patients are more likely to choose minority physicians, be more satisfied by language-concordant relationships, and feel more connected and involved in decision making with racially concordant physicians. Studies support the conclusion that professional interpreters are more likely to bridge the gaps in access experienced by non-English-speaking patients, although at least one study demonstrated persistently poor communication skills on the part of the physicians using such interpreters.

While the evidence is convincing that “majority” physicians need to be more effective in developing relationships and in their communication with ethnic and racial minority patients, we found no studies that demonstrate improvement through training. This finding is likely to be due to the paucity of formal training programs in medical schools and residencies.

Limitations

Our review of the literature has limitations. While we define culture broadly in practice, we limited our review only to ethnicity, race, and language. Additionally, we could not find studies using rigorous qualitative methods from peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, the broad scope of work published in books, a rich
source of medical anthropology, was not reviewed. Additional limitations include the significant number of
studies conducted in emergency medicine settings
and involving trainees that may not generalize to a larger
population of patients in continuity-based relationships
with experienced physicians.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of our literature review, we
make four recommendations. First, we must train pa-
patients to be more assertive when obtaining medical care. Significant improvements with information exchange
and patient satisfaction following only a 20-minute
training have been demonstrated. 42

Second, more serious efforts to diversify the physi-
cian workforce in both clinical and academic roles must
replace current rhetoric. There is considerable evidence
that African Americans and Hispanics desire and ob-
tain more care from African American and Hispanic
physicians, respectively. 45,46 The problems encountered
in racially, ethnically, and linguistically discordant phy-
sician-patient relationships reported here provide fur-
ther rationale for this recommendation.

Third, we need to expand our view of the doctor-
patient relationship to include the entire “environment
of care. Using professional interpreters as culture bro-
kers and using new interpreter technologies appear to
be helpful. Additionally, integrating community health
workers into practices has been a successful strategy,
but a discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of
this review. 47,49

Fourth, while we intuitively support continued train-
ing of physicians and physicians in training to be more
culturally competent, researchers need to redirect their
attention to demonstrate the effectiveness of this train-
ing and to study new interventions and care strategies.
Evaluation must be prospective and include health out-
comes as endpoints. Too often, the study outcomes have
relied on self-reported patient satisfaction, which have
been shown to be less reliable across language differ-
ces. 50 Additionally, those investigators who have
demonstrated significant achievement in the study of the
doctor-patient relationship and communication must
take up the challenge of diversifying their study popu-
lations—both the physicians and the patients.

Most of the studies we reviewed report disparities with ethnically or language-discordant physician-
patient interactions. Therefore, we suggest that more
emphasis should be placed on training physicians to
deal with concordant experiences for underrepresented minority patients. For example, do African American
physicians interrupt less often with African American
patients than Caucasian physicians do? Is nonverbal
communication between ethnically discordant patient-
physician pairs different from communication between
discordant pairs? Does ethnic concordance affect pa-
tient trust and disclosure of concerns? Without address-
ing issues such as these, the goals of Healthy People
2010 may still be our goals in 2050.

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