

Research Statement

My current program of research is deeply embedded in my practice experience as a clinical social worker. For more than four years, I worked with individuals with autism and developmental disabilities (DD) in medical and residential care settings. I am a personal witness to the challenges they and their families face daily – stigmatization, isolation, and a lack of resources to help them receive proper care. These challenges are particularly salient among those who are socioeconomically and racially/ethnically minoritized. It is well documented that minoritized individuals with autism/DD and their families face multiple disadvantages in current healthcare and service systems. Compared to their middle-class white counterparts living in high-income countries, minoritized individuals with autism/DD are less likely to receive necessary diagnostic and treatment services, while their caregivers are more likely to report physical and mental health challenges. However, I am also a personal witness to their resilience demonstrated by the fact that families I work with are striving to provide the best care possible for their child with autism/DD even during difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. With a specific focus on strengths and cultural diversity, my research aims to delineate physical and mental health trajectories of minoritized families caring for individuals with autism/DD across the lifespan. Specifically, my research aims to: 1) understand the effects of caregiving on the physical and mental health of both those with autism/DD and their families, and 2) develop and disseminate culturally relevant intervention programs to address the physical and mental health challenges they face.

I have strong academic skills with which to advance my research. I completed the Graduate Portfolio in Applied Statistical Modeling from UT Austin's Department of Statistics and Data Sciences. In addition, I am privileged to work with some of the most prominent and impactful researchers in the field of autism/DD and social work. Over the last four years, I served as a core member in the research lab led by Dr. Sandy Magaña, who is internationally known for her research with minoritized families of children with disabilities. The lab receives funding from federal and state agencies such as the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) and is situated in a collaborative network with researchers from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Texas State University (TXST), and the UT system. As such, I am experienced in conducting large, federally-funded clinical trials and in analyzing clinical trial data. To further advance my research, I have built a strong and strategic peer research and support network of scholars from other fields and universities. Through these collaborations, I have gained valuable experience and skills in research design, academic and grant writing, interprofessional communication, and teamwork. As a result of these experiences, I have developed a notable record of scholarly and scientific work through publishing peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, as well as presenting at international conferences such as the International Society for Autism Research Annual Meeting.

In collaboration with Dr. Magaña, I completed data analysis for a two-site RCT study on a parent education program for Latino families of children with autism. The results demonstrated that the intervention program was efficacious in enhancing parents' confidence in using evidence-based (EB) strategies and increasing their child's receipt of EB services, thus reducing the service disparities these families faced. We recently published two articles based on this RCT study: one in *Autism* (IF: 6.68) and the other in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (IF: 4.34). These publications significantly contributed to the literature as we were among the first to demonstrate treatment efficacy of culturally relevant interventions for Latino families of children with autism/DD. Among other collaborations, I worked with colleagues at UIC and the University of Maryland on a scoping review study of barriers to healthcare services

for immigrant families of children with DD. We found that immigrant families face systematic service barriers that profoundly hinder service accessibility, coordination, and continuity for their children with DD. This study provides a critical review of service disparities faced by immigrant families to guide future research and practice. The manuscript has been accepted by *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* (IF: 1.94).

I strongly believe that researchers are obligated to use innovative community-based strategies to help people in real life, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the start of the pandemic in February 2020, I have been part of a team of UT Austin researchers who developed and disseminated an online solution-focused crisis intervention training program to frontline professionals helping people affected by the pandemic. The training program was delivered to over 200 social workers in Wuhan and other cities in China, as well as first responders in the US through the Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers Texas Chapter. Our work was featured on [Texas Global](#) and [Social Work Today](#). Consistent with my research interests, I have conducted work that investigates obesity, health, and health behaviors of Latino families of children with autism/DD during the COVID-19 pandemic. We published an article focusing on the families' physical and mental health in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (IF: 4.61). The results showed that the pandemic adversely impacted Latino families in many ways so that Latina caregivers of children with autism/DD were at very high risk for depression. The results will inform the development of a clinical trial that aims to improve the health and health behaviors of Latino families of children with autism/DD. As a further extension of this line of work, we are collaborating with statewide partners and community agencies to disseminate trusted and reliable information to promote vaccination among people with disabilities to combat the COVID-19 virus. We designed a study that aims to identify [barriers to COVID-19 vaccines for families of individuals with disabilities](#). The most salient finding is that people with disabilities across Texas reported a variety of barriers to receiving the vaccines including accessibility, technology, and communication issues. We are using the study results to help guide vaccine efforts for people with disabilities across Texas.

My clinical and scholarly endeavors throughout the years have given me a solid foundation for furthering research on minoritized families of individuals with autism/DD. My short-term goal is to complete my dissertation project which will examine physical and mental health challenges faced by minoritized families of individuals with autism/DD. It will focus on 1) characterizing the state of the science on physical and mental health disparities faced by minoritized families of individuals with autism/DD; 2) examining the differences in physical and mental health outcomes between Latino and non-Latino White families with a particular interest in how the COVID-19 pandemic affects families who are low-resourced and minoritized; and 3) informing policy and practice to promote the physical and mental health of all families of children with autism/DD. To complete this project, I will conduct community-based research via continued collaborations with colleagues from different universities and disciplines.

My longer-term career goal is to become a faculty member at an esteemed research institution. To support my career goal, I will apply for funding from different sources like the Autism Science Foundation. I have developed a notable record of research in the development of interventions to enhance the physical and mental health of minoritized families and individuals with autism/DD. I intend to continue pursuing an impactful program of research that focuses on intervention development and dissemination. I am confident that my research will create long-term positive impacts on policy and practice for the autism/DD community and improve the quality of life for minoritized families and individuals.