

My Developmental Autobiography

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There's a verse in the bible that always caught my attention. It talks about how God knows the number of hairs on our head. He even knows when one hair falls out. It goes as far as to say that before our mothers had any idea that we would be born, God knew. Now, if I have learned anything in life, it's that as much as I try to control the outcomes, God ultimately decides what happens. He is in control and allows experiences to cross our path for a reason. Throughout my life, I victimized myself for what I went through. Until one day, I came to the realization that if I wanted to grow from my experiences, I needed to change something. I learned that my perspective on how I saw my life needed to change. This doesn't negate the brokenness I felt, but instead, it changes my mindset from a fixed to a growth mindset. Having a brother with an intellectual and physical disability was not easy. I constantly felt like I needed to take his pain away. Being separated from my dad and watching my mom struggle financially to raise my brother and I hurt. However, one common factor that ties all of this together was my parents being immigrants. Hypothetical scenarios always replayed in my mind. I thought to myself, what if my parents were legal, would that have made a difference in my life? Would my brother have been born the way he was? Would we have struggled financially? Would our family be separated? However, these questions take me back to my first point. God is sovereign over all aspects of our life, and if He allowed me to be in this family, to go through what I went through, it's because He has a plan for my life.

### **Prenatal and Infancy Age**

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. The youngest daughter of two strong-willed people that always put their children first. Their lives forever changed when my

eldest brother was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Since medical treatment wasn't the best in Venezuela, they left everything they knew behind, in hopes of a better life. They have always made it their mission to give us the life they never had but always wanted. However, coming to a different country where they knew no one and language was a barrier, made matters worse.

After one year of being in the United States, my mom found out she was pregnant. I came as a surprise to my parents, as they had already discussed that my brother would be the last. My mother was 40 when I was born which made her a high-risk pregnancy. Women over the age of 35 have a higher chance of giving birth to a child with down syndrome. To be exact there is a 1 in 100 chance that a baby can have down syndrome. Aside from that, there's also a possibility that the woman 40 and older have a possibility of "spontaneous abortion, preterm birth, stillbirth, and fetal growth restriction"(Santrock, 2019, pg 87). Thankfully, that wasn't my case. Prenatal care is highly important. The way a mother handles herself, what she allows in and around her body matters. Making sure you eat the right foods and exercise is half of what prenatal care should look like. My mom did her best to attend all her doctor's appointments and eat right, all while living below the SES level. Unfortunately, at nine months, my mom was still working. She contracted pneumonia from going in and out of the freezer. My mom says the day I was born was one of the hardest days of her life. She was alone when she gave birth to me due to my dad being in Venezuela and my grandma taking care of my brother. Since my mom had pneumonia at my birth, I also contracted it and had to stay in the hospital for a week while my mom was sent home.

When I was 6 months old my family and I moved back to Venezuela. Their hopes of finding a job, buying a house, and raising a family in the United States was cut short.

Unfortunately, life didn't turn out the way they had hoped. Like I mentioned previously there were two factors that always played a critical part in our lives. One was growing up under the poverty level and the second was my parents being immigrants. These were the reasons my family was divided for some time. However, before we left, my brother had just had surgery but when we got to Venezuela, my parents saw something was wrong. My mom immediately came back to the US with my brother and my dad and I stayed in Venezuela. It was a difficult transition for everyone and I was bounced around from house to house while my dad worked. Four months later when I was about one, I came back and was reunited with my mom but because of financial issues, my dad stayed and worked in Venezuela. It wasn't until I was four years old that we were all together.

When I was hearing my mom talk, she began to say that after I was born she hated the way she looked. She was depressed and stressed because she had to take care of two children on her own and when I cried my brother would need help somewhere else. I wouldn't latch on and she felt like she was doing something wrong. I am in no place to diagnose someone but the more she spoke, the more symptoms of postpartum depression I saw, and who could blame her.

There are three components to human development. The first is biological which refers to the changes seen in a person's physical appearance like "genes inherited from parents, brain development, height, and weight gains"(Santrock, 2019, pg 13). The second is cognitive which is an individual's thought process. Lastly, socioemotional is seen by how the individual interacts with others and what that interaction does to the person. In other words, their emotions and their personality. All three of these parts are closely related to each other. While learning about this the cognitive processes caught my eye. Like I mentioned earlier, I was separated from my dad

from the ages of one to four. That means he was not around for the first year of my life. He probably made me laugh at some point, he fed me, hugged, and kissed me. How is it that it wasn't until this paper that I found out he wasn't around? There's one researcher, Carolyn Rovee-Collier who believes that there are some "infants as young as 2 to 6 months of age can remember some experiences through 1.5 to 2 years of age"(Santrock, 2019, pg 149). However, Jean Mandler overrides this theory and believes Carolyn is referring to implicit memory which refers to things you remember unconsciously. According to Mandler, we remember explicit memory, which requires more facts or experiences. Explicit memory isn't seen until the second year of an infant's life because the hippocampus and frontal lobes are still maturing. We can't remember anything from birth to the third year of life and this is called infantile amnesia.

### **Early Childhood**

From what my mom says and the vague images I have in my mind, I was always a happy kid. I loved to run around, touch things that didn't belong to me, playing hide and seek, even when no one else was playing. In other words, I was a very "hyper" child as my mom called me but overall an easy child. I didn't fuss much and listened to my mom. I never really have temper tantrums. One thing about me she said, was that I loved learning. She said I would see other kids going to school and I couldn't wait to start. The feeling quickly changed. On the first day of school, she said I was crying because I didn't speak the same language the other kids did. After this she said, I began to change in school. This was the experience that impacted my development- the separation from my mom which happened every time I would go to school. It wasn't a normal "kid crying for his mommy." I stopped crying for my mom when I was about 10 years old. It's confusing when I look back at it. I was outgoing when I was around my mom but

when I wasn't, I was uncontrollable. In Pre-K and kindergarten, I was always with the teacher and wasn't good at making friends. I was very fearful. However, it makes sense after reading the text that children can't be placed in one category and shouldn't be labeled as difficult but instead looked at in a holistic way (Santrock, 2019, pg 174). At the age, my life, my identity revolved around my family. I did not like making friends so all I really had was my mom, brother, and grandma. I was attached to the hip with them and any sign of separation scared me. Erikson talks about autonomy vs. shame and doubt that basically describes how independence is vital to the development of a child. I was independent when I needed to be. When I was in school, I was all alone but when I was with my mom or my grandma I was solely dependent on them. Now that I look back at my childhood, my mom was very nurturing. She did everything for me. I can remember me being five and half-asleep on the bed, while my mom is dressing me. She loved me so much, she didn't want anything to happen to me but that caused me to not want to do things on my own. This was also around the time my dad came back into our lives. When I asked how I was around him, he said it took me about six months to get used to him.

### **Middle to Late Childhood**

During this stage my dad became my best friend. We were inseparable. He made sure I would not forget Spanish so he took me to the library every weekend to rent Spanish books. From my early childhood all the way up to my late childhood, the same issues in school continued. Every day up until I was ten years old I would cry when I would go to school. I remember literally grabbing on to my mom's arm so tightly just so she wouldn't let go. All the staff in my elementary school knew how I was. My social interaction worsened. I went from not talking to anyone, to requesting to be sat alone, far away from everyone. So my teachers had one

desk in front of the chalkboard just for me. I couldn't even sit next to people during lunch, I had to have lunch with a staff member. My grades were phenomenal, except for my social grade. From one to four scales, one being the lowest, I would get a 2. I remember I saw the counselor daily at my school and she even referred me to a psychologist, which I never went to.

It was around this age that I began to understand I was different. At this age I understood that my culture was different from others. I understood that other people had more than me. I understood that if I wanted to help my family, school needed to be number one. Lastly, I wish I never understood that in order to protect my family I couldn't tell anyone about my parents status, which ultimately meant hiding how I was feeling. I wish I never learned it because of what it caused me. It took so long to unlearn what I was taught from a young age. This made it harder for me to make friends because I felt as though I was hiding an important part of how I was. The text says one "important aspect of children's emotional lives is learning how to cope with stress"(Santrock, 2019, pg 309). This is the ideal-for your parents to teach you coping strategies. However that was never the norm in my house. Coming from a family with unresolved trauma within, they didnt know how to resolve what was bothering them, let alone mine. I saw how they struggled for food. I remember going to the corner store and my parents begging the owner for milk and bread. I kept thinking, even when I don't have this, I have school. This is what pushed me to fight.

### **Adolescence**

This was the hardest and most pivotal stage of my life. It was here that I began to understand my identity but it wasn't easy. During this stage I became very outgoing, but still fearful of the word. I had friends but low self esteem when I was in junior high school. Many

factors contributed to this, but the two that stand out were my appearance and SES. I wasn't as developed as most of my friends which caused me to get bullied by my peers. My family didn't have a lot of money so I wasn't wearing the latest shoes or trendy clothes. When I was 11 my dad had a heart attack and was given a 1% survival rate. Thankfully, God gave him another chance but this caused us to be separated again. It was as if history was repeating itself. He couldn't work the same job he had here so he went to Venezuela in hopes of sending us money. Romans 8:28 says "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." It was hard to see my dad in pain but because of this the family encountered Jesus. We accepted Christ as Lord and Savior before he left to Venezuela.

I didn't have a typical adolescence, where you're focused on friends, who likes you and fitting in. In high school my life got real. I knew that I needed to help around the house. I saw how my mom cried privately because she was tired of working as a house cleaner and not even making ends meet. So I took it upon myself to create this mentality of "provider," but because of my age I couldn't find a job. I became very angry at myself. I was angry because my family was separated, I was angry that what I learned in childhood about suppressing my feelings was happening at the age of 16. I didn't want to be 18 to party and leave the house, I wanted to be 18 to work and help my family but my mom was very protective of me. Decision making was a big concept on my mind. Every decision I made I based it on how it would benefit my family, and if it didn't, I wouldn't take that route.

Even though my mom was very protective of me, through her actions I learned how to be a strong independent woman. Being raised by a single mom I saw how she dealt with everything

head on. She never asked for help, she didn't rely on anyone. She did all on her own and never complained. Gender and culture played a huge part here. Here was my mom, a hispanic woman unconsciously teaching me to be strong and not count on anyone. Teaching me to not show emotions even when it hurts because ultimately no one will come to your rescue. This is how it is in hispanic cultures. You are taught that what happens in the house stays in the house. I wanted to be this strong independent fearless woman that didn't need anyone because she could do it on her own, but God didn't fit in that scenario. I had to learn that it was ok to open up about how you were feeling, that it was ok to ask for help. It didn't mean you were weak, you are actually stronger when you admit these things.

### **Adulthood**

Honestly I can't accredit where I am today to anyone but God. Yes, there have been other factors that have played a huge part in my growth but it was Him that got me there in the first place. He's been the one who's been leading me since day one, the one that got me to a place where feeling vulnerable is ok, where sharing my story brings healing to me. I have used different outlets from therapy to journaling. I was private about my experiences because of fear. I've learned that family cycles need to be broken. Just because they did it a certain way doesn't mean it's the right way. This journey has taught me to trust the one who's been writing my story since day one, to close my eyes and enjoy the ride. Most importantly, I have learned to change the way I see my negative experiences and find growth in every area.

I am still in my early adulthood stage so I have a long way to go. One thing that is making it difficult is the fear of the future. My family is a big part of my life and everything I do is for them. I haven't learned how to separate myself from them. I want to do everything for

them, I want to be their provider, their comfort but again I am not God. I have to learn to step back and let God take control. My biggest fear in life is my parents dying because I know my role will be caretaker to my brother and that scares me. I don't feel prepared yet. I am also scared that I won't have a family because I am too preoccupied with the one I have now. It's a constant struggle when these fears come to mind and I know it won't be easy but if I know I will rise like an eagle when this is done.

### **Family of Origin**

Before working with clients I need to deal with my family situation. I need to become more independent and become my own person. I need to learn to have my own voice. Being the youngest in the family has made me quiet. Being the child of two immigrant parents has made me fearful of what others will say. I have based my whole life on my family but in order to help others I have to be careful of any unresolved issues with my family. I haven't healed from my dad's absence. Even though I know he didn't leave because he wanted to, it's still a memory that brings me pain to talk about because it's time I can never take back. I am scared that he dies and I didn't spend much time with him. Having a voice, standing up for what I believe, not caring what others think and ultimately being that strong gearless independent woman is what I dream of becoming.

### **Conclusion**

The first weeks of class Dr.Orozco said something that changed my life. "Healing is not an event, it's a process." This brought such comfort and relief to my life. I always thought I needed to be "fixed" by a certain age when in reality it's not realistic. All throughout my life I will be healing from different wounds and that's ok. This paper showed me a lot of things and

opened my eyes to things I didn't know existed. It taught me that my childhood experiences will play out in the future if unresolved. I don't regret anything I've gone through anymore because it has made me the woman I am today.

References

Santrock, John W. Life-Span Development. 17th ed., McGraw-Hill Education, 2019.