Promotoras: Economic Development and Empowering Women

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Abstract

Every community is unique, and promotoras are uniquely positioned to work with what the community needs. Previous literature has looked at how promotoras programs effectively work in communities, but little literature has examined effects of training on promotoras themselves. The purpose of this study is to explore the life experiences (before and after) of promotoras. Using qualitative interviewing and grounded theory the narratives of ten promotoras were examined. The researcher focused on themes of empowerment and economic development and other themes that arose such as reasons for becoming promotoras, barriers and religious/spiritual beliefs. Promotora training and activity can positively affect the women in many areas.

Keywords: Promotoras, qualitative, empowerment, economic development, religious beliefs, leadership, barriers
Promotoras

Promotoras, also known as Community Health Workers (CHWs), have been trained in many medical subjects, as well as in domestic violence and are members of the same community they serve. “Promotoras have been utilized effectively with low-income populations, in rural and urban communities, and across diverse racial and ethnic and linguistic groups to promote health and behavioral health” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, 2011, p.4). The aim of promotora programs is to attend to the health needs of underserved populations by training members of these communities, who can reach their community effectively, to provide health promotion and disease prevention interventions (Swider, 2010). “Promotoras are natural helpers with expertise and knowledge that enhance the health and competence of their community through information distribution, assistance, and organization of community-building activities within social networks” (Cherington et al., 2008, p.1045). Promotoras have been described by their clients as having “socio-cultural characteristics, as well as their personal skills and qualities, and described them as trained, natural helpers whose personalized support removed barriers to health care and helped women to take care of themselves” (Reinschmidt, 2006, p. 256).

Promotora Programs

“During the past decade, private insurers, business enterprises, and the Federal government, responding to the high cost of providing adequate health care to employees and the population at large, implemented or proposed changes in health care delivery and financing” (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007, p.3). There is literature that looks at how promotoras impact the community and the effectiveness of the programs they serve (Kelly et al., 2007; Reinschmidt et al., 2006; Waitzkin et al., 2010). There are many promotora programs all over the
world that focus and educate people in their communities. Promotora programs have successfully assisted communities in the U.S. (Cherrington et al., 2008; O’Brien, 2010, Roman et al., 2009) and internationally (Dongre, 2009; Rahman, 2008) in areas such as cancer (O’Brien, 2010), depression (Rahman, 2008), and diabetes (Thompson, 2011). In El Paso, Texas the promotora program successfully increased knowledge and hypertension control among the underserved Mexican population in that city (Balcazar et al., 2009). “The community health worker (CHW) model is a popular method for reaching vulnerable populations with diabetes” (Cherrington et al., 2008, p. 1044). In Oakland, California a promotora program educated and helped a community suffering from diabetes to self-manage and treat their disease for one year and the results were positive (Thompson et al., 2011).

Cancer is another area where promotora programs have been shown to be successful. “U.S. Hispanic women suffer a disproportionate burden of cervical cancer, with incidence and mortality rates almost twice that of whites. Community health workers, or promotoras, are considered a potential strategy for eliminating such racial and ethnic health disparities” (O’Brien et al., 2010, p.1186). Promotora programs have increased women pap screening rates and knowledge about cervical cancer as well as self-efficacy (O’Brien et al., 2010).

In Pakistan community health workers performed CBT to women that were pregnant and suffered from depression, the results showed that women in the intervention group had decreased in levels of depression symptoms and were more prone to get their newborns immunized compared to the control group (Rahman et al., 2008). In Michigan the promotora program was implemented and as well pregnant women decreased in symptoms of depression and stress (Roman et al., 2009). In India pregnant women were educated about newborn danger signs.
Women were more aware about newborns danger signs and seeking health care for their children increased (Dongre et al., 2009).

Another great area that women are being impacted in and surpasses the rate mortality of cancer and AIDS is violence (Kelly et al., 2007). “The reality of violence against women cuts across race, nationality, religion, culture, and economic level” (Kelly et al., 2007, p.242). In Texas promotoras went into Spanish speaking, low income communities to educate women and increase awareness about violence (Kelly et al., 2007). Every community is unique, and promotoras are uniquely positioned to work with what the community needs. These programs support the idea that they increase awareness which helps communities prosper and attain a voice.

**Women and Work**

More women are working today and starting to be economically independent, but there is still underrepresentation of a sixty- percent gap between what a man earns to what a woman earns (Felsenstein, 2011). Women of color are underrepresented in positions of power in government, corporations, and non-profit institutions” (Gutierrez, 1990, p.149). “Traditionally, men considered it shameful for their wives to work, but this is less true today, with additional income becoming essential” (Drolet, 2009, p.59). We now live in a society where men have to work multiple jobs in order to sustain the household and still then many women have to work to help their husbands, or if they are single, to sustain themselves or their family (Drolet, 2009). Literature looking at women that owned their own business and that are employed found that those women feel more empowered especially in the area of economics. (Lephot, 1995; Mehra, 1997).
Women and Empowerment

Empowerment has been defined as “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action and improve their life situations” (Gutierrez, 1990, p. 149). Empowered women can successfully contact resources and achieve environmental as well as personal change (Johnson et al., 2005). Empowerment also increases resiliency in women (Johnson et al., 2005). One study showed how the relationship between the promotora and client creates empowerment of both, but it does not look at how this process of empowerment also affects the promotoras themselves (Becker, 2004).

Method

Purpose and Hypothesis

Studies looking at promotoras own personal empowerment are minimal. The purpose of this study was to explore empowerment and economic development among promotoras and see what other themes arose. The researcher believes that women in promotora positions have more empowerment than when they were not promotoras and have gained economic development as well.

Participants

The study population included 10 Hispanic female promotoras that have completed a six month promotora training and six months of internship. Hispanic was defined as being born in Mexico, or any other Latin American country. These promotoras are currently either working or volunteering in Los Angeles County. Their primary language is Spanish and their second language English. They are all non-vulnerable adults over the age of 18. The participants were
recruited using a snowball sampling method. The researcher contacted a promotora who works promoting good health. The promotora conducts workshops and trainings in Los Angeles, California and obtained contact information of other promotoras she came in contact with. The researcher wrote an introductory paragraph in English and Spanish that was used for the researcher to introduce herself, along with the study procedures which were facilitated over the phone or via email to participants creating a snowball sample.

**Data Collection**

This study was approved by the California State University, Northridge institutional review board on December 3, 2012. The researcher performed an in-depth interview using a general interview guide approach (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The interviews were audio recorded. The researcher met the promotoras in a location that they felt most comfortable talking in. The researcher conducted the interview in the preferred language for the participant either in English or Spanish. The participants received a five dollar gift certificate to Target to thank them for their time.

**Materials and Procedures**

The participants signed the consent form which also had a list of resources to Mental Health Services. They also received a Bill of Rights. The promotoras were asked ten open-ended questions that the researcher created. Interviews and audio-recording of the promotoras were conducted individually.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher used ground theory to analyze the interviews (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The audio-recording from the promotora interviews were transcribed by the researcher and listened to three times to get an accurate transcript then the audio-recording was erased immediately. Ultimately, the general themes and categories were determined by using line-by-line coding. The researcher read each
interview and searched for meaning units which were coded and then organized into concepts and themes for example, empowerment and economic development, as well as exploring other categories that arose. The researcher created different files for the different themes and color coded them to each participant.

**Study Limitations**

There are strengths and weaknesses in a qualitative design. The weaknesses are subjectivity and generalizability. The findings of the research cannot be generalized to everyone and it cannot be replicated (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Another limitation is that the researcher had a short time to build rapport with the participants that might have influenced their response.

**Results**

**Reasons for Becoming a Promotora**

There are many reasons and motivations that drove these participants to complete a training and become promotoras. In many of them the concept of helping people and educate them about health and other issues that in low-income and primarily Hispanic communities are often ignored was a reason.

What motivated me to become a promotora I always liked to learn, help people and help my community.

**Community Involvement.** Being involved in the community and making a difference in the community was a category that came up as a reason for becoming a promotora for several women. Many saw the need to be the voice for their community to see change. The sense of helping and being able to find and provide resources for the community is a joy for these women.

Bueno pues la verdad lo que me motivo aser una promotora por que es un trabajo bonito por que te envuelves con la comunidad hablas con muchas personas aprendes las
necesidades de las personas y aprendes también a buscar recursos para ayudar a estas personas.

**Purpose in Life.** Many women explained how they were stay at home mothers some going through divorce, others through domestic violence and felt incomplete. They felt that they were missing something. Others mention that since they were small children they knew their purpose was to help others by working in the medical field:

Pues a mi me motivo que yo era una ama de casa por 25 años pero pasaron cosas en mi matrimonio y todo eso y yo estaba desesperada entonces una amiga me comento que si yo quería estudiar para promotora y yo dije que es eso entonces como yo siempre era voluntaria en las escuelas y los parques ya me dijo que era algo similar a eso verdad ayudar a la comunidad trabajar con la comunidad ok pues entonces voy a empezar y ya cuando empeze a estudiar y empeze a aprender tantas cosas fue lo que mas me gusto y cada dia me estoy motivando mas por que cada dia aprende uno bastante mas aparte este como ayudo a la comunidad dise uno mira yo me estoy aogando en este problema y la comunidad tambien esta sufriendo mas asi que eso me ayudo para ayudar mas a mi comunidad.

Este me motivo el saber que siempre e querido o quise ser medico o enfermera y no e podido regresar a la escuela entonces dije bueno pues es lo mas lo mas bajo que voy a garrar ahorita después tal vez pueda seguir el estudio.

**Role Models.** For other promotoras it was admiration for other promotoras in their communities, friends and in one participant her own father the reason for becoming promotoras. These women saw how promotoras in their community were knowledgeable about different themes and used it to educate others:

Mi admiración por una vecina, que viendo como se desenvolvía ayudando a los demás con todo su conocimiento, fue en ese entonces que me di cuenta que me gustaria aprender y adquirir el conocimiento de lo que es una promotora y como yo podría llegar a mucha gente con mi conocimiento, ya que desde muy pequeña me gustaba ser solidaria con los demás.
Oh! me motivo mi papa. Porque mi papa en Guatemala es promotor de salud desde que yo era niña y el yo veía el trabajo que el hacía y me gustaba como el se involucraba entonces el es mi motivación y trabajar con la comunidad.

**Feelings of Empowerment**

After going through the promotora training and becoming promotoras in their communities all the women noticed a positive change in themselves. Feelings of empowerment were shown in many ways in these women lives:

*Change in Self-Esteem.* An increase in self-esteem was seen in many women after becoming promotoras. Some share that before starting the promotora training they were shy and not social. After becoming a promotoras they felt empowered to do things that they had never done before in their life like talking in front of other people, conducting workshops and making a change in one person at a time. They learned how to grow as a person and become more open-minded:

Si hubo un cambio este me animo y me empodero a tomar a y hacer cosas en mi vida que no las había echo a tocar puertas nunca pense que podia hacerlo (giggle) y este pararme frente y ver la gente y dar un taller. El simple echo de saber que estas hablando con la gente que vas a hacer un cambio en no vamos ahir a un taller y vamos a decir voy hacer el cambio en toda la gente si no que si tu haces el cambio solamente en una persona creo que eso es lo mejor.

Mi cambio significativo es de que um me ayudo a hacer desenvolverme mas um como persona e de poder ser mas abierta y poder comunicar por que yo era muy timida como que el sistema aqui me afecto y me puse asi como que me bajo el autoestima y ademas era muy timida no podia comunicarme entonces yo me sentia asi y entonces el programa de promotoras entonces a mi me ayudo mucho por que cubren muchos temas incluso de autoestima y eso me abrio a mi la mente osea y ser mas mente abierta. Me siento realizada por que para mi es una carrera y este cada vez estoy escalando en mi manera de ver como es que voy este de comunidad en comunidad en diferentes comunidades.

*Empowering Others.* The women also mentioned how they felt empowered to empower others in their community. They empower others to attend meetings in the community, to receive
services needed, and live a healthier life. They also felt the need and duty to educate the community about the many societal systems and encourage them to advocate for their rights:

Me siento bien me gusta hacerlo y eso es precisamente mi trabajo de eso se trata de decirles participen, involucres, avoguen por los derechos de sus hijos y ustedes no lo hacen no va haber nadien que lo va hacer la única forma de tener mejores servicios y tener una comunidad mejor es abogando y estando uniendonos y estando presentes y aprender sobre el sistema educativo y tambien de el sistema de la ciudad que haveces no es tan bueno necesitamos nuestra voz necesita estar mas presente. No siempre por que tenga a sus hijos jóvenes quiere decir que ya no van a crecer y que ahí se van a quedar, nos va acostar mas trabajo a coplarnos a la sociedad y tener una mejor estabilidad económica pero si se puede se puede lograr.

**Leadership Roles.** Many promotoras were empowered to be leaders in their communities. Many of them attend town meetings, and fight for the needs in their communities. They attend political town meetings to be the voice in their communities and speak about the needs and problems affecting everyone they represent. As well as see the importance to be role models for children and adults that look up to them:

Hablado con los políticos hemos luchado para que ellos nos den el apoyo para hacer los parques en nuestra comunidad para limpiar las calles para hacer este ya le mensione lo que es el projecto de guarderias este en fin muchos projectos muy lindos sean llebado a cabo por medio del promotor tambien lo que es sembrar arboles, huertas este caseras y huertas comunitarias. El ser promotor nos da la fortaleza nos da la Fortaleza de romper las barreras verdad los limites.

Pues me siento es algo bien bello este um ser por ejemplo líder por que tienes que consantemente estar estudiando y aprendiendo mas, buscando recursos encluso asta leyendo mas que es lo que esta pasando para nosotros poderlos ayudar a ellos y tambien a enseñarles que como ser lideres yo trabajo como comite y encluso mucho de los miembro son líder y tambien enseñarles como hablar y como defenderse es muy bello.

**Life Accomplishments.** The women feel happy and complete after becoming promotoras. They see how their life was before and know that they have accomplished a lot in life. They are happy and enthusiastic after every workshop to continue with their mission of reaching out to their community. They want to help every person in their community to live a more healthy physical, emotional and social life:
Después de cada enseñanza y servicio me siento más comprometida a seguir tocando puertas para que cada vez más personas adquieran el conocimiento necesario para tener una vida más plena, a nivel Físico, Emocional y Social. Ser promotora para mí a nivel personal e intelectual me hacer sentir una mujer completa y feliz.

**Volunteering.** Volunteering is something that many of the promotoras do and are passionate about. Many women have been empowered to volunteer and give back to their community. Even though they are volunteers they are happy with what they do:

Tengo cuatro años siendo voluntaria para asociación americana del corazón y me pagan por llevar las clases de las enfermedades cardiovasculares, y actualmente estoy llevando otro proyecto de Visión y Compromiso en colaboración con el institute de Corazón Sangre y pulmón, hago arreglos florales, y de ahí voy sacando para mis necesidades económicas.

**Change in Economic Development**

Economic growth is something these women have gained. Many have attained stable employment or volunteering opportunities since becoming promotoras. The promotora profession has opened many doors in the job force for these women. Many are currently working in the same organization that trained them, in non-profit organizations and in clinics. Many were stay at home mothers taking care of the family and others had low wage paying jobs before entering the promotora profession:

Cuidaba niños y después limpiaba casas, hacia como business assistant y luego estaba en la escuela de Ingles cuando yo escuche del programa.

**Barriers in the Profession**

Barriers that affect promotoras are language barriers, lack of support and commitment, and lack of funds.

*Language.* Barriers in language are shared by many promotoras. All the promotoras are Hispanic and their first language is Spanish. Some promotoras see it as a barrier and others see it as a challenge that pushes them to learn the language:
Estoy tratando de aprender mucho Ingles por que eso era para mi un obstaculo pero gracias a dios lo estoy logrando.

Si yo creo que no son obstaculos para mi si no son retos, son retos por que por ejemplo uno de mis retos asido el idioma yo hablo mi primer idioma es el Maya Q'eqchi’ y cuando empeze ir a la escuela en Guatemala empeze a aprender el Español y a hora llegando a este pais aprender el Ingles entonces a sido un reto para mi pero me estoy superando y cada dia lo estoy implementando y ahorita estoy en un nuevo projecto y todo es en Ingles si es un reto pero lo estoy trabajando osea es un proceso para mi ese es el reto.

**Lack of support and commitment.** The lack of support and commitment from the community and lack of time is a barrier for some promotoras. The women mention that there are negative people that do not support or understand what they do in their community. The lack of support does not stop these promotoras of reaching their goal:

Si que aveces la gente aveces no se quiere involucrar, no cree en el sistema, um ay muchos cambios todo el tiempo ay cambios, el tiempo que no haveces no ay tiempo que ay que ir a esa junta communitarian y traer la informacion o ir a la otra todo eso entonces el tiempo es una barrera que es un obstaculo que siento que es un obstaculo para mi y la falta de involucramiento de otras personas.

Si siempre ay obstaculos aveces ay personas negativas siempre ay gente negativa, nesias palabras oidos sordos escuchar y seguir como dice el dicho para adelante para adelante para atras ni para agarrar pulso.

**Lack of Funds and Recognition.** The final barrier mentioned by some promotoras was the lack of funds, in some organizations. There have been many budget cuts throughout the country and many preventative programs have been highly affected. Many professionals are not aware of the promotora programs and they are not feeling recognize by other professions:

Si uno de los mas grades obstáculos es que la promotora de salud la ven como un trofeo para llevar a cabo los proyectos destinados a la comunidad, y no le dan el valor que cada uno de nosotras/os tiene, y solo quieren darnos por nuestro trabajo algo minimo, asi que como lideres de la comunidad tambien tenemos que abogar para que se nos dé el pago que merecemos, porque en muchas ocasiones tienden a querer explotarnos, y yo no estoy de acuerdo con esto, no lo dije por la organización a la cual soy voluntaria por muchos anos si no por algunas otras organizaciones no lucrativas.

Bueno el mayor obstaculo en mi profesion y como promotora asido que nosotros como promotores no somos muy bien reconocidos.
Spiritual and Religious Beliefs.

Seven out of ten participants mentioned either religion or spirituality during the interview as well as a source that helps them to take care of themselves emotionally. Many give thanks to god for everything in their lives and others put everything that happens in their lives in god’s hands. For many god is the power that gives them strength to continue to do what they do:

Lo otro es que soy muy religiosa y trato de llevar mi fe religiosa lo mas disciplinada que pueda, el mantener mi espíritu en paz y armonía, es el mejor regalo que yo puedo darme a mí misma.

Soy Cristiana y me oprendi a dios y todo se lo dejo en manos de dios. Me pongo a escuchar alabanzas y leo la biblia y lo que me a enforzado mi integridad y estoy biendo que no todo lo que brilla es oro y no por pensar hacer mal a una persona este voy a quedar feliz no alcontrario por que yo se que el dia de mañana dios lo sabe todo.

Pues mentalmente pues pedirle adios verdad fortalesermme cada dia mas quererme mas, fortarlesermme y darle gracias a dios por lo que uno tiene y por lo que nos da unqne no todos los dias son iguales pero siempre yo le digo gracias señor gracias por este nuevo dia cada dia al empezar y al terminar sea un dia bueno o sea un dia malo aqu darle gracias a dios por que gracias a dios yo tengo este trabajo y ay mucha gente alla fuera que en realidad no tiene trabajo, no tienen techo no tienen comida verdad y pues aveces uno busca la manera de poder ayudarlos.

Others practice meditation as a source of spirituality. It was interesting to see a combination of both spirituality and religion in some participants:

Yo ago a yoga, practico yoga con Dilini y para mi eso es una erramienta que me ayuda mucho eh tengo 7 años asiendolo y pues para mi eso es primerdial y tambien mentalmente me ayuda en la espiritualidad, voy a la iglesia y tambien me gusta leer libros y escuchar audios que son de motivacion de superacion personal que tengan mensajes que me ayuden a creser como persona.

Discussion

It was important to hear the narratives of the promotoras themselves. There were many themes that rose from hearing their stories. It was interesting to hear their motives for choosing the path of promotoras. We heard that for many it was the calling to help others, as well as the
dream that they always had for the medical field and one day becoming a doctor or nurse. For others it was the determination to increase their knowledge and seeing others in their community as role models. These women described the change they went through after starting to work in their community. The sense of empowerment and being able to empower others in their community. There were women that after starting to work felt a sense of confidence and pride in what they were doing. Many felt complete, victorious and happy with their profession.

Economically most of the promotoras are doing better and for the ones that are still not employed they continue to advocate for better opportunities and recognition from other professionals. The barriers of language, lack of support, recognition and low pay like in any other profession continue, but some looking at them as challenges instead of obstacles. Religion/spirituality was another theme that flourished and continues to strengthen these women in a positive way. During the interviews all these women always had a sense of pride and smile when talking about what they do for themselves and their community. They were happy to share their stories and be known for what they do every day to help their communities.

**Implications for Social Work**

Many organizations are working with promotoras for outreach and prevention work. As social workers we might encounter and work with these women which are an essential piece in reaching out to the community and together change social injustice. It is important to be aware of what promotoras do in the communities and how that profession has positively impacted these women’s lives. As clinical social workers we might encounter a promotora as our client and it is essential to be aware of the multiple strengths that promotoras have attained after going through their training of becoming promotoras. These women have encountered social injustices when it
comes to being recognized for the hard work they do and are not recognized by other professionals something for the social work profession to unite with and help advocate for.
References


Appendix

Interview Questions

1. When did you start your training to become a promotora? How long was your training?
2. What motivated you to be a promotora?
3. What was your life like before becoming a promotora? Was there a significant change after becoming a promotora? What about after starting to serve your community?
4. How do you feel about being a promotora?
5. What motivates you to continue in your profession?
6. How do you feel when talking with other people in your community in leadership positions?
7. How confident do you feel about going into the community? How do you see yourself in your community?
8. Are you currently employed? What is your source of income?
9. Do you encounter any barriers in your profession?
10. What do you do to take care of yourself mentally and physically?