

DIVERSITY

"Mi Casa Es Su Casa//: Beginning Exploration of Mexican Americans' Natural Helping

by Shirley L. Patterson & Flavio Francisco Marsiglia

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a pilot study on natural helping among Mexican Americans conducted in a large urban area of the Southwest. Twelve community-identified natural helpers were interviewed using the "Natural Helper Interview Schedule" utilized in previous studies in other parts of the country with European American subjects. As expansion of the earlier studies, the interview schedule was translated into Spanish and assessed for cultural appropriateness. The similarities found between the findings of the Mexican American sample and previous samples may suggest that natural helping is a cross-cultural phenomenon. At the same time, the unique trends identified among Mexican American respondents may indicate a stronger family connection to natural helping processes in this community. Respondents narrated the helping incidents as if the recipients and providers of help were all family members. A series of common trends emerged from the data gathered on helping incidents. Some of these trends suggest that natural helpers assisting recent immigrants used a doing type of helping style, but a facilitating style of helping was also reported for other recipients. Although these findings cannot be generalized, they provide important information about community-based natural helping networks and provide beginning comparisons about natural helping characteristics among different ethnic groups. These findings can be of use by practitioners and policy makers as they attempt to reach the Mexican American community in a culturally competent manner.

THE PHRASE "MI CASA ES SU CASA" evokes an aura of warmth and hospitality. For many, irrespective of ethnicity, this maxim may carry with it conditions of behavior. "My house is your house" when you are invited for a specific time or a particular event. For Mexican Americans and other Latinos, however, the meaning of this phrase may be quite literal and unconditional. For instance, in the current study a thirty-nine-year-old female helper describes how she helped a friend, a female teenage recent immigrant:

Well, this young woman came from Mexico and she did not have any place to live and did not have any family. I offered her my home and she accepted immediately. She lived with me for longer than a year. Of course, it was helpful since she had no place to live. Later, she met a young man and they got married, thus, she does not have the problem any longer.

This helper typifies the sample of respondents interviewed for this study. They were all natural helpers identified by other community members as "personas serviciales (helpers)". This article presents the results of a series of interviews conducted with the identified Mexican American natural helpers residing in the metropolitan area of a major Southwestern city.

The purpose of the research was twofold: 1) to verify whether procedures and instruments used in earlier studies of European Americans would be applicable to another ethnic group, and 2) to gain a beginning understanding of the phenomenon of natural helping among Mexican Americans to facilitate future comparisons with other groups. The proximity to Mexico and the very porous nature of the international border make the Southwest region a geographical, social, and political unit encompassing communities at both sides of the international line. Individuals of Mexican ancestry can be found navigating throughout this unique cultural and lin-

guistic spectrum (Acuna, 1996). Different acculturation, language proficiency, immigration histories, and socioeconomic statuses make the Mexican American community of the Southwest very heterogeneous (Anzalua, 1987). The premise of this research effort was that natural helping diversity within cultural groups needs to be better understood before comparisons between groups can be made.

Literature Review

A focus on strengths has been a recurring theme in the theoretical and practice literature of the social work profession. For instance, in social work's formative years, Mary Richmond (1917) articulated the purpose of social work as releasing the unduplicated excellence in people. Esther Twente (1965, 1970), a pioneering social worker and educator, focused on the capacities, potentials, and creative abilities of older people. In their ground breaking theoretical work, Germain and Gitterman emphasize that the life model of social work is based on life processes, directed to "people's strengths, their innate push toward health, continued growth and release of potential" (1995, p 821). Formulations of the strength perspective have been further elaborated by other theorists and educators (e.g. Saleebey, 1997; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kristhardt, 1989).

Within this framework, the positive role of informal social support in buffering/mediating health and mental health problems has been amply documented through research (Patterson, Memmott, Brennan, & Germain, 1992). Most of this research, however, has been conducted at differing levels of conceptualization (see, e.g., Collins & Pancoast, 1976; Lewis & Suarez, 1995; Pancoast & Collins, 1987). For instance, Lewis & Suarez (1995) identify three major functions of natural helping networks: (1) as buffers between individuals and sources of stress; (2) as providers of instrumental and social support; and (3) as information and referral sources and lay consultants. Often research has focused rather narrowly on particular populations or specifically on health or mental health problems (see, for example, Ballew, 1985; Chatters, Taylor, & Neighbors, 1989; Horwitz, 1978; Richardson & Pfeifferberger, 1983; Vega, Kolody, Valle, & Weir, 1991).

Few studies have attempted to describe, systematically, the functions and attributes of helpers from the beginning to the end of the helping process. One study has systematically compared relatively large samples of natu-

ral helpers from two different regions of the country, including both genders, and a range of age groups (Patterson, 1987; Patterson, Germain, Brennan, & Memmott, 1988; Patterson et al, 1992; Patterson, Memmott, Germain, 1995/1998). The findings of the study indicated remarkable similarities between natural helpers in the two regions although they were separated by geography and history. That is, people in one region (Kansas) were more informal, open, and trusting, and the people in another region (Connecticut) were more reserved, insular, and less trusting. Yet, very similar helping occurred in both regions. For example, most helpers, irrespective of recipient type (relatives, friends, or neighbors), offered assistance before they were asked for help. Clinical judges, who rated the helping episodes, found that the most frequent problem dealt with by helpers was environmental issues followed by life transitional or interpersonal problems with friends. Further, the majority of helpers used a doing (instrumental) style of helping with relatives and neighbors but less often with friends. Conversely, the facilitating (expressive) helping style was used more frequently with friends than relatives and neighbors while the combination facilitating-doing style was used more often with relatives and friends than neighbors. The outcome of help for most helpers focused on eliminating or alleviating the source of stress associated with the recipient's problems. Helpers assisted friends in strengthening their coping capacities more frequently than relatives or neighbors.

The most interesting significant findings in this study were related to gender (Patterson, et al., 1995, 1998) in the natural helping process. The authors noted that: 1) Women were motivated to help more out of a sense of caring, while men helped out of a sense of moral obligation; 2) Women reached out and offered help before it was requested, men after it was requested; 3) Women used facilitating and facilitating-doing styles of help more often than did men. 4) Although, no significant gender differences were found with regard to problem type for helping episodes involving relatives or friends, women tended to help neighbors with environmental problems more than men did; 5) Men and women reflected the same pattern in their perceptions of helping outcomes. Men indicated they had eliminated stressors and women stated they had temporarily reduced the impact of stressors and strengthened the coping capacities of the people they helped; and 6) Women felt closer to the people they helped than did their male counterparts. All helpers, however, felt closer to recipients at the end of the helping effort than they did at its inception. Two helping styles

were identified by the study: The "doing style" (instrumental) and the "facilitative style" (expressive). Those using the doing style attempted to eliminate or relieve stressful situations by doing something themselves while those natural helpers using the facilitative style attempted to promote a growth process, proceeded indirectly and worked with and through people (Patterson et al., 1988, p. 74). These two styles were not found by the researchers in pure states, some helpers combined them. Because the subjects in this study were exclusively European American, the next logical step would be to compare helpers cross-culturally using the same interview instrument. This pilot study is a first step in that process.

The Mexican American Experience

The socio-historical context of the Southwest makes it likely that the experience of Mexican American families living in this environment will follow a different course than that of European descent families. Natural helping appears to be an integral part of the Mexican and Mexican American experience. Authors such as Griffith & Villavicencio (1985) have traditionally described these helping relationships among Mexican Americans and other Latinos in the context of "social supports." The components of these social support systems for Mexican Americans and other Latinos have been commonly identified as: 1) the extended family, 2) folk healers (curanderos/as), 3) religious institutions, and 4) merchants and social clubs (Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 1982). The Mexican American extended family has been described as including: primary kin, extended kin, and close friends and neighbors (Griffith & Villavicencio, 1985). The porous nature of the family can be explained by the centeredness of family (i.e., familism) in the life of the community members. Mexican American and other Latino cultures stress cooperation, collectiveness, and strong inter-generational family ties (Comas-Dilaz & Minrath, 1987; Harrison, Wodarski & Thyer, 1992; Smart & Smart, 1991; Smart & Smart, 1995). The family is seen as a problem-solving unit that extends beyond blood relations. This kinship network encompasses a deep sense of obligation by its members to each other for economic assistance, encouragement, and support (Gómez, 1987). The greater kin-centeredness of Mexican American families as opposed to the strong ethos of independence common among European American families, may intensify the natural helping processes and outcomes among Latinos (Cantor, Brennan & Sainz, 1994).

Within the Mexican American cultures, reciprocal care-giving between the generations has been identified as the basis for natural helping networks (Valle & Bensusen, 1985). Mexican Americans and other Latinos have also been found to rely on relatives more often than European Americans for emotional support and to regard familial support for emotional problems as superior to all others types of support (Keefe, Padilla, & Carlos, 1979). Research conducted on the East Coast and using generic Latino sub-samples have found that Latino parents receive more help from children than do their European American counterparts (Cantor et al., 1994). The same research found that ethnicity is strongly associated with the gender and the income of the parent being helped. Older Latinas with lower income received the most help (Cantor et al, 1994).

"Curanderos/as" (traditional healers) are often identified as part of the family/community-based support system but working on spiritual, physical health, and mental health needs (Krassner, 1985). Thus, "curanderos/as" will not be considered part of the extended family natural helping network. The specialized type of helping "curanderos/as" perform and the informal training many of them receive tend to differentiate them from natural helpers as defined in this study.

Institutions such as ethnic-based churches and social clubs appear to be an important source of support for Mexican Americans and other Latinos and they function very much as an extension of the extended family. On the other hand, dominant societal institutions have been viewed as outside or external social systems which influence the Mexican American family. Ruesschenberg and Buriel (1995) explain the relationship between Mexican Americans and outside institutions as resulting from the pressure to retain Mexican values that Mexican Americans have in the Southwest. This pressure is based on the fact that the Southwest was once part of Mexico, it is geographically connected to Mexico, and it is heavily populated by persons of Mexican descent. At the same time, the authors say, because the dominant institutions of society are largely controlled by European Americans, it is necessary for Mexican Americans to adapt to them in ways that may be different from their behavior toward the extended family. Thus, it is possible to assume that traditional cultural values may be present at the extended family level and not in other majority society dominated environments. Community-based institutions may provide in some cases more of a home-like environment while majority society institutions may require letting go of the home-culture in order to adapt. The sense of not

belonging that some Mexican Americans feel may prompt them to seek help from the extended family instead of requesting help from unfamiliar institutions.

Acculturation status also has been studied in relationship to gender roles as differentiating types and intensity of use of family and friends' social support networks. More acculturated Mexican Americans were found to have larger support networks, more contact with network members, and displayed more reciprocal helping than less acculturated Mexican Americans. Some researchers have hypothesized that more recent immigrants may have smaller social support networks due to lack of contacts and the dislocation from family of origin (Griffith & Villavicencio, 1985). Gender role expectations for some married Mexican immigrant women were found to restrict contact outside the home/family setting (Vega, et al., 1991).

These cultural descriptors provide the background for the current research, knowing that Mexican Americans in the Southwest are an extremely diverse group. The findings of this research are conceptualized as an attempt to better understand natural helping systems within a specific subgroup of this diverse community.

Method

Data

The Natural Helping Interview Schedule (Patterson, et al., 1992) was translated for administration to monolingual or Spanish dominant respondents. The instrument primarily is close-ended and contains questions designed to elicit information on characteristics of natural helpers, the help recipients, the helping act, style of helping, and perceived outcome and effectiveness of the help. More specifically the instrument includes interview background data; demographic data on helpers and recipients of help; questions related to separate instances when helpers provided assistance to a relative, a friend, and a neighbor; questions about helpers' experiences in receiving help from a relative, a friend, or a neighbor; and general questions with respect to helpers' predominant ways of relating to and helping others.

Coding procedures

The close-ended portions of the interview were recorded by the interviewers on the schedule. Those parts of the interview requiring a description of the helping episodes (for the relative, friend, and neighbor receiving help from the respondent and the helper as recipient)

were tape-recorded. The recorded helping episodes included a description of the problem and what was done to help. Transcribed and translated helping episodes were assessed from an ecological conceptual base using Germain and Gitterman's (1980) typology of needs (life transition, interpersonal processes, and environmental issues), and helping outcomes (elimination of the source of stress, alleviation of the source of stress, and strengthening coping capacity), and Patterson et al.'s (1992) concepts of helping styles (facilitating, doing, or combination of the two styles). Using these conceptualizations, two social work judges independently rated each helping episode for problem type, helper style, perceived outcome, and effectiveness of help. To resolve disagreements in ratings, a third judge independently rated materials to achieve a majority.

Sample

The original pool of subjects was drawn from small group meetings held at three different community sites with the purpose of identifying potential subjects who had a reputation for being "real" helpers ("personas serviciales"). Real helpers were defined as people who were known in the community for the informal spontaneous help they provide to relatives, friends, and neighbors. Names of helpers who were identified by at least three informants were kept as part of the initial pool of candidates. Some of them were present at the meetings and some were not. The development of the subject pool continued until 12 subjects were identified. Although the study's original sampling design called for respondents with different levels of language proficiency, the informants used to identify respondents were mostly English dominant or bilingual. They referred potential respondents that mirrored their language proficiency. Although, the sample did not include any Spanish monolingual respondents, eight of the subjects preferred using the Spanish language version of the instrument.

Half of the twelve respondents were residents of a predominantly Mexican American barrio (predominantly Latino neighborhood) of a large Southwestern city and the other half were residents of a predominantly Mexican American bedroom community adjacent to the same city. Within this second community all respondents had collaborated with Habitat for Humanity to build their own homes.

Half of the respondents were female and half were male, ranging between 22 to 69 years of age, with a median age of 42. They were not very mobile geographically, residing in the current community an average of 13 years.

Two-thirds of them were born in Mexico, and the remaining third were first generation Mexican Americans. Although 40% of them reported being English dominant, all were proficient in Spanish. All of them identified themselves as Hispanic (Hispano/a), Mexican (mexicano/a) or Mexican American (mexicano/a americano/a). Seventy percent of the respondents self-identified as being Roman Catholic. Seventy-five percent had finished high school. Eighty-three percent of them were employed full-time and had labor or service oriented occupations.

Findings

The Helping Episodes

General characteristics. Since the sample size (6 females and 6 males) of this pilot study is small, extreme caution is used in drawing inferences from the data with respect to the findings of the larger study (Patterson, et al., 1992). Therefore, the authors are treating these data (46 helping episodes) as a microcosm of the 800 helping episodes from the earlier study with the recognition that the data do not lend itself to analysis by recipient type. The number of helping episodes described by each respondent was four (one instance of help with a relative, one with a friend, one with a neighbor, and one instance when the respondent was the recipient of help). Data on two of the neighbor helping episodes are missing, leaving a total of 46 helping episodes described. In the current study, findings related to how the help was initiated, what the major problems were, and the helpers style of helping were similar to the findings of Patterson and her colleagues. The findings differed, however, in terms of the perceived outcome of the help and helping effectiveness.

As shown in Table 1, in the majority (61%) of helping episodes, helpers reached out to offer help before requests for help were made. In terms of focal problems, environmental issues was rated by clinical judges as the most pressing area of concern followed by life transitional problems and interpersonal problems. It is important to note that although the initial focus may be on a particular problem area, other problem areas often are part of the equation. For example, one of the helping episodes involved an older (life transition) relative who needed a place to live (environmental) because of disagreements (interpersonal) with adult children. It is important to note that the recipients of help (helpers) mirrored the natural helpers' profile in some aspects and they were different in other aspects. For example, they

ranged more broadly in age than the natural helpers, from 15 to 82 years old with a median age of 41 years. The recipients of help included Mexican nationals who were monolingual in Spanish. The recipients of help appeared to be lower in socio-economic status and had a lower educational attainment than the helpers.

The tape-recorded episodes illustrated the specific types of problems with which helpers assisted. There were a number of instances where helpers invited relatives (and several friends) to live with them in their own homes for months to well over a year. Providing transportation was a frequent activity of helpers who, particularly assisted friends and neighbors by picking up their children at school, taking them to the store, the doctor, to pay bills,

Table 1. Characteristics of Helping Episodes

Characteristics	Helping Episodes (n=46) ^a	
	n	
Help initiated		
Recipient asked	15	32.7
Helper offered	28	60.8
Combination	3	6.5
Focal problem		
Life transitions	12	26.0
Interpersonal	6	13.0
Environmental	28	60.8
Helper style		
Doer	23	50.0
Facilitator	11	24.0
Facilitator/doer	12	26.0
Perceived outcome		
Eliminated stress	11	24.0
Alleviated stress	9	19.5
Strengthened coping	23	50.0
Other	3	6.5
Perceived effectiveness ¹		
By raters		
M	5.3	
By helpers		
M	6.1	

Note. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

¹ Data missing on two neighbor helping episodes.

^b On a seven-point scale, from 1 = not effective to 7 = very effective.

or service their cars. Helpers also proffered money (as a gift or loan) to all four types of help recipients. Emotional support was provided freely especially to relatives but, to some extent friends and neighbors as well. Typically, emotional support was tendered over serious illness, death, and low self-esteem while advice and counseling targeted problems of abuse and alcohol. Helpers also assisted all types of recipients with connections to such resources as employment, government housing, and public assistance. Helpers recounted teaching activities (with respect to friends and neighbors) ranging from how to care for a baby to how to fix tires and run your own business to how to take medications properly and safely. For all recipient types, helpers provided products (furniture, food, tools, radios, and bicycles) and services (help in building a fence or re-roofing a house).

Not surprisingly, the judges rated half of the respondents as employing a doing (instrumental) helping style in the episodes recounted. The doing style often is associated with problems that require direct action and material aids to resolve people's difficulties. Environmental problems lend themselves to this kind of direct action. Slightly over a fourth of the helpers used a facilitating-doing (expressive-instrumental) style of help in dealing with issues which required both direct action and activities which promote a growth process. Growth is facilitated by such activities as encouragement, reassurance and summarizing strengths. For instance, a death in the family often requires both support and use of material means. Almost one fourth of the helpers primarily used a facilitating (expressive) helping style in helping people. Listening, reassurance, support, and encouragement undergird this style of help.

In the episodes, judges ratings of helper outcomes indicated that half of the respondents assisted people in such a way that their capacities to cope more effectively with developing or continuing problems (e.g., learning how to care for a baby) were strengthened. A fourth of the respondents assisted people in eliminating stressors associated with the problem (e.g., building a fence) and, for about 20 percent of those helped, the stressors associated with the problem were temporarily alleviated (e.g., facilitating the initial grief process).

Finally, clinical judges rated the effectiveness of the help given in each of the 46 helping episodes. Moreover, the respondents also rated their own effectiveness in each helping activity. Note that raters assessed the effectiveness of helpers nearly a full point lower on a seven-point scale than helpers rated themselves (see Table 1). The authors have speculated that the lower effectiveness ratings

by clinical judges in part may be due to the professional lens used in assessing effectiveness.

Some gender considerations. Although the helping episodes also were analyzed by gender, the investigators were concerned about reducing the data further due to sample size. To provide some of the "flavor" of gender differences, however, the following is reported with caution. With respect to the dimensions of mutuality, helpers were asked about their predominant ways of relating to and helping others. Women (66.7%) tended to help more out of a sense of caring and men (50.0%) because it was the morally right thing to do. Typically, both female (50.0%) and male (50.0%) respondents offered help to others before assistance was requested. Women, on average, had more life conditions in common with the recipients of help than did males (respectively, $M = 5.5$; $M = 3.8$, on a seven point scale, from 1 = nothing in common to 7 = many things in common). In response to the question about receiving help from people whom they had helped, a similar pattern obtained with woman receiving more and men receiving less help (respectively, $M = 4.6$; $M = 3.0$, on a seven point scale, from 1 = not at all to 7 = very frequently). The overall findings of this exploratory study tend to support Patterson et al.'s (1992) earlier findings with respect to help initiation, problem type, helper style, and gender differences.

Emerging themes. The helping episodes in this study are rich with examples of how Mexican American female and male helpers serve as a first line of defense in the prevention of life stress, or in strengthening capacities to deal with stress or building resistance to stress (Germain & Patterson, 1988) as well as eliminating or temporarily alleviating the source of stress (Germain & Gitterman, 1980). Although we provided considerable detail in the previous section of this article with respect to the helping episodes of Mexican Americans, clear comparisons of this study with the previous study (Patterson, et al., 1992) of European American helpers cannot be made due to sample size. Nonetheless, there are certain trends in our study that bear a striking similarity to some of the findings of the earlier study.

First, the helping episodes are filled with exemplars of the provision of assistance that allows relatives, friends, and neighbors to use the strengths of those near by not only to sustain life but to deal effectively with a range of problems in everyday living (e.g., housing, transportation, money, resources, life crises, learning). Like helpers in the earlier study, the majority of Mexican American helpers chose to describe problems or difficulties which were associated with environmental issues and

in using the doing helping style most frequently (see Table 1). A 36-year-old male helper as a recipient of help, provided an example of an environmental problem with which his 40-year-old male neighbor assisted him.

The problem was my roof. They canceled my house insurance and if I did not put on a new roof they would not let me have insurance. After this occurred, I told my neighbor all about it and he said, 'make a barbecue and we will come over and help you'. He helped me put on the shingles. I mean, everybody, him and his three brother-in-laws removed the old shingles and we cleaned the roof. We all did a little bit of everything. But, my neighbor, he was the one that had experience in putting on shingles so he practically guided us in doing that. And I was able to get my insurance back; I was able to get it back.

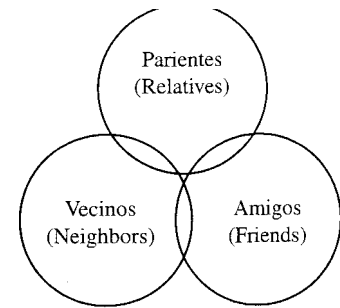
This helping episode is a graphic example of the data depicted in Table 1 of the helping process from its beginning to its end. After the neighbor became aware of the environmental problem (the need for a new roof) he used a doing style of help (putting on a new roof) to eliminate the stress associated with the problem in terms of a faulty roof and no house insurance. Both the clinical judges and the helper assessed the neighbor's help as very effective.

Secondly, the helpers in the current study also used the multiple helping roles of doing (instrumental), facilitating (expressive), or a combination of facilitating-doing approaches based on the requirements of the problems with which they were confronted. Similar to the earlier study, the facilitating-doing style of help was used more often than the facilitating style. One 45-year-old male helper, for example, described the facilitating-doing assistance he provided his mother at the death of her father.

I gave her mainly moral support because she lost her father who was my grandfather. Well, it was being there, you know, my presence and seeing the family together. Plus, like touching, hugging her, and patting her shoulder ... wishing, you know, she could maybe cry or something ... this was her last parent. Although my father was there, there were some duties to do around the house ... like I took out the trash, went for groceries and maybe cleaned up a little here or there.

Death, of course, is a crisis frequently affecting older

Figure 1. Natural Helping Systems of Mexican Americans



members of society. It is a life transition. Through his "being there," caring, support, and touch, this male helper used a facilitating-doing approach to strengthen his mother's abilities to cope with a future that did not include her parent. Moreover, he was able to accomplish tasks (cleaning, shopping) that might interrupt the grief process. The helper's actions were quite effective and appropriate to this transition.

A third trend focuses on the Mexican American concept of extended family which may include friends and neighbors as well as family of origin. The boundaries between each of these entities is open. One episode recounted by a 28 year old helper who was helped by a 50 year old female friend, illustrates this point well.

I was pregnant and I did not have maternity leave. My friend spoke with our supervisor and asked her to transfer all her accumulated comp time to me, thus I was able to spend more time with the baby. She did not tell me anything about it. I learned about it through my supervisor. She is more than family to me. She will baptize my son.

Through the traditional ritualistic practice of "compadrazgo" (becoming family by baptizing somebody's child) the helper is becoming family. The valuable help provided by the co-worker put her into the realm of family. There is an apparent dialectic relationship between the family and helping and in some cases, the helping brings non-family members into the family (See Figure 1). The helping occurs first, and the helper is honored by initiation into the family as a member. This trend was not present in previous research on natural helpers due to the culturally grounded nature of the described practices and norms.

Fourth, a number of the helping episodes involved teaching and learning which served to strengthen the ca-

capacities of people to deal more effectively with the everyday problems of life. A 39-year-old male helper, for instance, taught a 45-year-old male friend how to determine the measurements of tire sizes in order that the friend could go into the business of fixing tires. It turns out that the friend is now the helper's major competition. Another male helper described how a female neighbor modeled the helping role for him.

I think she probably showed me how I can help other people. Talking with them without even knowing them ... "y me gusto mucho" ... and that is the way I feel, that I should do that for other people. They may not ask me for help, but the way she taught me ... the way she helped me, I feel I have the knowledge to help a total stranger. It helped a lot. I learned a lot from her just by her example.

Fifth, although the sample size was small, helper responses to questions about typical ways of relating to and helping others revealed gender differences similar to those found in the previous study (Patterson, et al., 1995). Women's motivation for helping stemmed from a sense of caring and men out of a sense of moral obligation. Further, in this pilot study, half of the females and half of the males stated they would offer help if they saw a need.

Although there are cultural differences between people of diverse ethnic backgrounds and although valid comparisons cannot be made because of sample size, natural helping is a human activity that emerges across cultures.

Discussion

Translated into Spanish, the interview guide effectively elicited the information from Spanish dominant respondents. The instrument appears to be conducive to the study of natural helping among a selected group of moderately acculturated Mexican American respondents. The helping episodes in this study are very similar to the helping episodes described in earlier studies. This research initiated an exploration of natural helping among Mexican Americans in the Southwest. In addition, previous samples were rural and the current sample was mainly urban. The instrument appears to lend itself well to this city-based sample. These findings for Mexican American natural helpers may indicate that for this group, natural helping is also a common phenomenon in the city. These findings came exclusively from the helper's per-

spective. Due to confidentiality issues, we did not identify nor interviewed any of the recipients of help. However, we were able to integrate the perceptions of helpees from the helpers themselves as each one of them shared with us a story when they were the recipients of help.

Although eight of the respondents were born in Mexico, none of them were recent immigrants. Thus, that end of the immigration continuum was not represented in the sample. In future research efforts it would be important to include this sub-group.

The findings appear to indicate that the extended family, friends and neighbors were all treated like family. The helpers helped not only parents and siblings but also brothers- and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews, uncles and aunts, friends, and neighbors. The traditional roles of relatives, friends and neighbors were blurred and the role of kin was assigned to non-family members. However, from the helping incidents it appears that allegiance to family is primary (see e.g., Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 1982; Griffith & Villavicencio, 1985).

The more polarized gender socialization process that is typically associated with Latinos and Latinas did not emerge from the data gathered in this study. In fact, in this sample men used the facilitating style of helping more than women did. This trend was illustrated in the vignette of the son helping his mother after the death of the grandfather. In terms of motivation for helping, however, prescribed gender socialization prevailed with women helping more out of a sense of caring and men more out of a sense of moral obligation.

In this sample, teaching and learning were incorporated in helping as part of the acculturation process of some of the recipients. Through the help received, they learned how to sustain themselves through work or functioning at home within the context of the host society. Helpers in many cases were passing on survival skills that they may have acquired during their own acculturation process. Part of becoming acculturated is the ability to advance economically and socially. Similar to earlier studies (Patterson et. al, 1992; Patterson et. al, 1998) this research corroborates a focus on the unique capacities, strengths, and altruistic motivation found in the helping activities of relatives friends and neighbors. This line of inquiry follows a long tradition in the field of social work that focuses on the innate capacities, strengths, and potentials of people (Germain & Gitterman, 1995; Richmond, 1917; Saleebey, 1997; Twente, 1965 & 1970, Weick, et. al., 1989).

Implications

A large-scale study should be done to allow for comparisons between Mexican Americans with different levels of acculturation and between Mexican Americans and European Americans. Conceptualizations of what natural helping is needs to be further explored across cultures and within cultural groups using a consistent conceptual and methodological approach. The description of the helping incidents suggests the natural helping interview schedule is conducive to capturing cultural differences. This type of data gathering approach could be expanded by using complementary ethnographic tools such as participant observation. This approach may increase our understanding of the cultural meanings assigned to natural helping.

The described sample of recipients appeared to have tapped into natural helping as a strength. Instead of underutilizing social services, as it is often believed, Mexican Americans in the Southwest may be receiving some of the help they need from relatives, friends, and neighbors. From an ecological perspective it is key for social work students and practitioners not only to understand the thinking, feeling, and behavior of their clients but also the natural resources that can be brought to bear on the problems and difficulties of client systems, but which clients at either end of the natural helping relationship (giver or recipient) may not spontaneously share with their social workers. These issues need to be included as part of the assessment and action plans for individual clients and families. As we gain a better understanding about the different characteristics of natural helpers, we can tap into them differentially. In addition, many of the same inquiry tools used in this study can be used by practitioners in their assessments. For example, narratives have been found to be affective means to assess natural helping networks. It is through story telling that practitioners can gain a better "insider" perspective of existing or sparse resources.

In looking at the lower ratings given by the judges about the effectiveness of the help given in the helping incidents, we need to be cautious about using professional standards while assessing natural helping. Natural helping is a spontaneous, unpaid, untrained activity. Practitioners need to be open to different cultures and approaches to helping. Becoming culturally competent may imply accepting natural ways of helping that may not match concepts learned in the formal educational setting. As professionals, we probably need to concentrate on understanding what these systems are and assisting our clients in utilizing resources in which they are immersed. On the other hand, it is important to

understand the type of helping incidents Mexican American clients experience and narrate. The type of help social workers offer may not match their expectations and experiences (see Rueschenberg & Buriel, 1995). By becoming familiar with community-based natural helping practices and beliefs, the social work community may develop increased effectiveness at mediating between a more communal/family oriented type of helping and the more individualistic type of interventions utilized at many of the agencies for which they work.

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- Shirley L. Patterson is professor emerita and Flavio Francisco Marsiglia is assistant professor, both at Arizona State University, School of Social Work, Tempe, AZ.
- Author's note: This research was made possible by the Lois and Samuel Silberman Fund Award Program.
- Original manuscript received: June 3, 1998
Revised: January 29, 1999
Accepted: February 4, 1999

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