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Program Evaluation for Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meetings

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Abstract

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Training low-income women to advocate for themselves and their community has the potential to be life changing. Pacoima Beautiful was established in 1996 to empower and provide their members with leadership skills through civic engagement, social justice and environmental justice advocacy. This research used qualitative data acquired from three focus groups (N=10), utilizing narratives from Pacoima Beautiful's adult members to evaluate the impact of the Member's Meetings in empowering participants and providing them with useful leadership skills. Results revealed seven themes: cohesion, personal satisfaction, self-efficacy, exposure, barriers, empowerment, and leadership. Pacoima Beautiful is an effective community setting to empower communities and provide members with leadership abilities through their Member's Meetings program.

Keywords: members qualitative, program evaluation, empowerment, and leadership

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

Pacoima Beautiful has been an active community-based non-profit dedicated to social justice and environmental justice issues through advocacy and community engagement since 1996. The local non-profit has been dedicated to recruiting youth and adults to become active members of their community in fighting for equal resources and a safer, cleaner, environment. Through their adult and youth programs, Pacoima Beautiful seeks to empower and provide leadership skills to their members who will ultimately be seen as leaders in their community.

This research project used qualitative data acquired from two focus groups that included Pacoima Beautiful's adult members. These focus groups were used to perform a program evaluation for Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meetings to evaluate how well the program [Member's Meeting] empowers participants and provides them with useful leadership skills. Grounded from the ecological systems model and empowerment theory, as well as past research done on leadership and modalities for teaching leadership skills, the researcher sought to answer the research question: how does Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meeting program empower participants and provide them with useful leadership skills?

SECTION 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecological Systems Model

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model suggests four environmental levels that impact an individual's development. These four ecological levels explain how individuals and family units are affected by ranked environmental systems in which they live and function. The ecological levels are: microsystems (level 1), mesosystems (level 2), exosystem (level 3), and macrosystem (level 4), with each level affecting the individual differently (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, Collins, Frels, 2013). The microsystem is described as the immediate environment in which a person is operating such as the family, a classroom, his or her neighborhood, and local organizations, such as Pacoima Beautiful. The mesosystem is described as the interaction of two microsystems such as the connection between school and a child's home experiences, or in adults, among family experiences, work experiences, and experiences in social life. In other words, the mesosystems are the relationships between two or more contexts or experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie et. al, 2013).

Exosystems however, are the external environments in which the individual is not directly involved but still affects him or her such as links between more persons, groups, or other living organisms within the individual's environment. Lastly, the macrosystem, which is described as the larger cultural context, such as attitudes, ideologies, and policies of the culture in which an individual lives, are developed temporarily as they can change over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Onwuegbuzie et. al, 2013). In social work,

ecological theories are holistic and stress that all elements within levels of systems play a role in an individual's development.

Ecological systems theory allows for the consideration of external factors at play, not just biological, in the development of empowerment and leadership. The Pacoima Beautiful Member's Meetings seek to develop leadership affecting all four levels explored in ecological systems theory. Prior research revealed that empowerment and leadership are developed, not innate (Rappaport, 1984).

The conceptual framework for this evaluation will focus on participant development of empowerment and leadership skills through participation in Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meetings. In using the term "development", the researcher is using Urie Bronfenbrenner's definition:

"Human Development is the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content" (1979; p. 27).

Empowerment Theory

Many scholars have debated whether empowerment is a goal or outcome, such as feeling powerful or competent, or whether it is a process of modifying personal and structural conditions to allow people to achieve power or empowerment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Swift & Levin, 1987). For the purposes of this evaluation, empowerment will be conceptualized as a process. Empowerment theory, its research, and proposed interventions, connects individual well-being with larger social and political ecological systems (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). According to Rappaport (1981; 1984), the process of empowerment is a construct that ties individual traits, such

as strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors, to social policy and social change that enables people to gain control over their lives and their participation in their community (1981; 1984).

Empowerment is described as the process of developing personal feelings of increased power. These personal feelings do not necessitate an actual change in structural arrangement pertaining to social change but rather a change in competence to achieve it (Pernell, 1985; Pinderhughes, 1983). This ongoing process of empowerment may be centered in the local community as it involves group participation, mutual respect, caring, and critical reflections that allow those who lack power, or a share of resources in the community, to gain greater access or feelings of control over those resources (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

According to the ecological systems perspective, empowering processes for individuals include civic engagement or participation in community organizations. It refers to empowerment as an individual's ability to cope with social stressors, but it does not ignore ecological, cultural and structural influences during this process (Itzhaky & York, 2000; Zimmerman, in press). On an organizational level, this process includes, but is not limited to, collective decision making and shared leadership in the community, and at the community level the process includes collective action and mobility to access government and other community resources (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

This process of empowerment has become increasingly essential for understanding the development of individuals, organizations, and communities (Zimmerman, in press). In this program evaluation, empowerment theory is used as the theoretical basis for analyzing how Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meeting facilitates the

process of empowerment through the participation of community members in these meetings.

Empowerment & Gender

Past research done on empowerment and gender reveals conflicting results. Some studies showed no differences between men and women in terms of participation in their community or empowerment (Yoder & Kahn, 1992), but other scholars have found that empowerment and gender have a significant effect on each other when gender participation is taken into account (Itzhaky & York, 2000): meaning, women are more likely to participate in community activities than men. Scholars found that men and women are not entirely different in their understanding of empowerment; the difference lies in how they choose to achieve it (Itzhaky & York, 2000).

As Yoder and Kahn (1992) stated, women seek “power to” or personal empowerment, whereas men continually seek to “power over” or seek domination and control (pg. 384). In an analysis of empowerment theory by Riger (1993), the contention was that empowerment theory essentially deals with “power over” rather than “traditionally feminine concerns” of collaboration, communion, and cooperation.

These preferred values of connection, relatedness, community, cohesion, and collective good, in terms of social power, rather than individual and political power, give insight as to why women tend to have higher community participation than men (Browne, 1995). Women have been found to be less concerned with “representative” status than men, instead, they are more concerned with the need to be active in community organizations and in the decision-making process, and this is enough for their individual development of empowerment (Itzhaky & York, 2000). In men, their formal status is

more important than participation, and in turn, through their symbolic status, is how empowerment is achieved (Itzhaky & York, 2000).

The relationship between empowerment and gender is crucial in the evaluation of Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meeting program and analyzing how the program teaches empowerment to its participants, especially women. Although the program was designed to be inclusive of men and women in the community, staff at Pacoima Beautiful have identified a disproportionate presence of women as compared to men, which is in keeping with findings by Itzhaky and York (2000).

Empowerment & Women of Color

Although women have been found to have more inclination to community participation, which may or may not lead to empowerment, other scholars have identified that the empowerment process with women from traditional backgrounds takes longer than with men and may peak at earlier stages of participation (Gutierrez, 1990; Itzhaky & York, 2000). Itzhaky and York (2000) found that this was especially true with women of low socioeconomic status, but their findings gave grounds for optimism that women of low socioeconomic status can be empowered and *are* willing to participate in their communities (2000). The potential for positive change and empowerment exists in all individuals, but women of color experience many negative symptoms of powerlessness that emerge from strategies to cope with a hostile world (Gutierrez, 1990; Pinderhughes, 1983).

In empowering women of color, scholars have proposed that the person facilitating the empowerment piece does not presume they hold the answer to social problems affecting this population, but rather in the context of collaboration, women can

develop the insights, skills, and capacity to experience a sense of personal power (Bock, 1980; Gutierrez, 1990; Itzhaky & York, 2000). The suggested modalities or empowerment interventions are the involvement of women in mutual aid, self-help, or support groups with individuals who not only experience similar problems, but also provide emotional and concrete support while experiencing individual effectiveness in influencing others (Coppola & Rivas, 1985; Itzhaky & York, 2000; Pernell, 1985). Given that Pacoima Beautiful is based in Pacoima, which is a predominantly low-income community, the modalities presented in past research are key in evaluating Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meeting program.

Women & Leadership

Participation in community and political activism not only contributes to the process of empowerment in women of color with low socioeconomic status, but it also contributes to women's abilities in the areas of influence, use of power, collaboration, cohesion, and leadership (Galambos, 2000; Itzhaky & York, 2000). Similar to empowerment, men and women experience differences in the use of power and leadership (Itzhaky & York, 2000). Although more women are developing leadership skills and earning degrees (Chernesky, 1998; Itzhaky & York, 2000), men still hold a disproportionate share of executive positions, management jobs, and leadership positions (Galambos, 2000; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2014).

This disproportion of women in leadership compared to men can be explained, in part, by their gender-role socialization and the different gender expectations there are for men and women in society (Galambos, 2000). Men are socialized to be task-oriented, competent, competitive, and independent, whereas women are socialized to be

relationship-oriented, supportive, noncompetitive, and dependent (Chernesky, 1998; Galambos, 2000). Through this socialization, women feel devious when using assertion, power, and direct influence when dealing with other adults or addressing issues in their communities. Although men and women need to be involved in different tasks and activities to develop their leadership skills, in a patriarchal society, women require more of these opportunities (Galambos, 2000). In developing leadership skills, women need to be given opportunities to learn and practice technical and task-relevant skills, and acquire interpersonal and social skills in order to work effectively with males in an overwhelmingly male-dominated culture (Chernesky, 1998; Galambos, 2000).

According to Galambos (2000), in order to strengthen leadership and potential leadership skills in women, there needs to be a comfortable forum or context for women to engage in leadership activities. Activities that include family interactions, school experiences, community projects as well as social community groups all contribute to leadership development (Galambos, 2000; Klenke, 1996). Community organizing initiatives and local organizations can therefore be considered as effective empowering community settings (Maton, 2008). These settings are distinguished from other settings by the clarity of their goals, missions, and visions of simultaneously building community power, promoting the psychological empowerment of participants, and providing leadership skills (Speer & Hughey, 1995). In evaluating Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meetings, the researcher will hold the above-mentioned elements as a standard for the program's effectiveness in empowering its members as well as providing them with valuable leadership skills.

The Current Study

A review of the literature on ecological systems theory, development of empowerment, and leadership in low-income communities reveals that empowerment and leadership skills are developed, and not innate. Driven by their mission, Pacoima Beautiful is an external factor that provides community-organizing initiatives, forums, and civic engagement opportunities that have been found by researchers to be effective empowering and leadership-skill teaching tools in all four levels explored in ecological systems theory.

Based in a low-income community, the program was designed to be all inclusive of men and women, however, due to the large presence of women, the findings that women of lower socioeconomic status are willing to participate in their community and can be empowered, may be supported in this research. This willingness to participate also contributes to women's abilities in the areas of influence, use of power, collaboration, cohesion, and leadership. With the mentioned research elements in mind, this study explores the research question: How does Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meeting program empower participants and provide them with useful leadership skills?

SECTION 3

METHODS

The Agency- Pacoima Beautiful

Pacoima Beautiful is a community-based organization in the North-East San Fernando Valley in the community of Pacoima. Pacoima Beautiful is a non-profit organization designed to train community members to become civic leaders in promoting health, safety, and identifying environmental and social issues affecting the community, as well as speaking on behalf of those issues to local elected officials (Y. Lopez-Ledesma, personal communication, October 15, 2015). The leaders of Pacoima Beautiful are dedicated to their philosophy and organization's mission: to empower the community through programs that provide environmental education, advocacy, and local leadership in order to foster a healthy and safe environment. The directors at Pacoima Beautiful believe "our mission is about empowering and that's how I relate it to my philosophy, I always lead by example" (V. Padilla, personal communication, October 15, 2015).

Pacoima Beautiful lacks the capacity to evaluate their programs, and is concerned that their approaches may be limiting the productivity of their interventions (Mayberry, Daniels, Akintobi, Yancey, Berry & Clark, 2008). Using ecological systems and empowerment theory concepts as a framework for this program evaluation, the researcher explored how Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meeting program empowers members and provides them with useful leadership skills.

Design of Study and Sampling Technique

This qualitative study conducted three focus groups (N=10), to perform a formative program evaluation of Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meetings. The

California State University Standing Advisory Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects approved this study. The researcher attended a monthly Member's Meeting, introduced herself as well as the program evaluation and asked for volunteer participants, resulting in a convenience sample of Pacoima Beautiful "Members". No recruitment occurred outside of the Pacoima Beautiful Member's Meeting, limiting generalizability to other empowerment/leadership programs.

Focus Groups

By conducting focus groups, the researcher was able to clarify questions for the participants (N=10) and also ensure that participants did not skip over any items or parts of questions. Additionally, the researcher was able to observe behavior and non-verbal cues during the focus groups. This allowed the researcher to develop a deeper and more subjective understanding of how the participants experienced the open-ended questions that would not otherwise be possible in a quantitative design, such as a survey. These elements were identified as strengths to this research design.

Weaknesses of the chosen design however, were also identified. Social desirability bias, the tendency of participants to respond to questions in a way that communicates a favorable impression of him or her or the program being evaluated, is a threat to internal validity. It was identified that a number of the participants have been a part of the Member's Meeting for numerous years, and there may have been a possibility that they responded in ways to make the program appear more successful than it really is. We attempted to mitigate the potential social desirability bias by reassuring participants of their confidentiality and identity protection so they are aware that Pacoima Beautiful staff will not receive any identifying data and can therefore encourage raw responses.

In another attempt to mitigate the potential desirability bias, the researcher provided a thorough explanation of the value of participant responses and the importance of constructive criticism that will not be used to harm the organization in any way shape or form. The researcher made sure that participants understood the importance of their true feelings and experiences to the organization and how programming could potentially move forward with all of their constructive feedback.

Instrumentation

In order to conduct this formative evaluation, the researcher developed nine exploratory questions that were centered on empowerment and leadership. Because it was identified that participants were mainly Spanish speakers, the focus groups were conducted in Spanish to enhance comprehension and culturally competent research.

Questions asked by the facilitator were:

1. Porque usted empezó/continua a involucrarse en la Junta de Miembros?
2. Que son algunas de las cosas que ha aprendido durante las Junta(s) de Miembros que ah aplicado o piensa aplicar en su vida?
3. Que es lo que esta haciendo hoy día que no hacia antes de involucrarse en la Junta de Miembros?
4. Que es lo que mas le gusta de la Junta de Miembros?
5. Hay alguna barrera que le impide atender la Junta de Miembros mensualmente? (ejemplo, transportación, el trabajo, la distancia, el horario, etc.)
6. Se siente apoyado por los facilitadores de la Junta de Miembros?
7. Recomendaría amigos e amigas a la Junta de Miembros? Si, si, porque?
8. Su familia y amigos lo apoyan en atender la Junta de Miembros?
9. Que es lo que le hace sentir el venir a la Junta de Miembros que no encuentra en algún otro lado en la comunidad?

English translation:

1. Why did you begin to attend/continue to participate in the Member's Meeting?
2. What skills have you learned at the Member's Meeting that you have or will apply to your life?
3. What are you doing in present day that you did not do prior to being involved in the Member's Meeting?
4. What about the member's meeting do you enjoy most?

5. Are there any barriers that prevent you from coming to every Member's Meeting (i.e. transportation, work, distance, time, etc.)
6. Do you feel supported by the staff facilitating the members meeting? If so how, if not, why not?"
7. Would you recommend friends to the Member's Meeting, if so, why?
8. Do your family and friends support you attending the Member's Meeting?
9. What do you get from coming to the Member's Meeting that you can't find anywhere else in the community?

At the end of each focus group, the facilitator left an open forum to address issues or comments about the Member's Meeting that were not otherwise discussed or brought up in the group questions. The three focus groups were conducted on February 13, 2016 (N=3), February 15, 2016 (N=3), and February 25, 2016 (N=4). Given the small overall sample size (N=10), results are reported in aggregate.

Data Analysis

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. The researcher independently reviewed the transcripts and created a list of seven (7) emerging themes based on the exploratory questions as presented in Table 1 (Appendix A). These themes reflected general categories of topics that emerged during the focus groups based on participant(s) statements. The researcher then revisited the transcripts and used line-by-line color-coding to code for the identified themes.

SECTION 4

RESULTS

Although it was identified that mostly women attend the monthly Member's Meetings, these focus groups consisted of more men (60%) than women (40%). One hundred percent (100%) of the participants (N=10) were Spanish speakers and identified as Latino/a. The length of membership ranged from 6 months to 16 years ($M = 6.41$, $SD = 5.14$) with the majority participating between 4 and 11 years. This information was gathered to determine if the number of years participated influenced the participant's personal experiences in the Member's Meetings: indeed it appeared that those that had been members for a longer time, were more enthusiastic and forthcoming in the focus groups.

Results from Focus Groups

The participants in this study discussed several factors related to the evaluation of the Pacoima Beautiful Member's Meetings. The seven most frequently mentioned themes within each focus group were identified and coded as: cohesion, personal satisfaction, self-efficacy, exposure, accessibility, empowerment, and leadership.

Cohesion

When discussing what initiated their inclination to become involved in the Member's Meetings and why they continue to participate, seven of the ten participants (70%), associated this inclination and continued participation on their experience with cohesion in the Member's Meetings. Although some found this connection to be deep familial connection, others described the experience as that of camaraderie. The common principle explored here was the experience of cohesion, which was stated to be the

majority of the participant's reasons for their continued participation.

Cuando vamos a los desfiles, se siente uno como en familia (When we go to parades, you feel like you're amongst family) (male, 8-year member).

Eh aprendido a convivir aquí con ellos aunque no eh convivido mucho, nos vemos como familia, porque es apoyo. Y me da gusto cuando me encuentro a alguien en la calle (And I have learned to share the space here with them, even though it's not for long, we see each other like family, because it's supportive. And I'm glad when I bump into someone from here, in the community) (male, 8-year member).

En realidad nos sentimos como en familia. Cuando hacemos limpiezas en la comunidad, uno barre, otro recoge, otro se lleva las bolsas. Y es bonito. Y luego ver a los niños como corren y juegan juntos. (In reality, we feel like we're amongst family. When we have community clean-ups, one of us will sweep, another collects the trash, and another will dump the trash bags. And it's beautiful. And then you see how the little ones run and play together) (female, 10-year member).

Based on this narrative, not only do the members experience the cohesion themselves, but it also transcends to the younger generations who run and play in cohesion in the shared time and space of the Member's Meetings.

Personal Satisfaction

When exploring questions regarding what the participants value and enjoy the most about the Member's Meeting, the theme of personal benefits was reiterated.

Personal benefits might be the inclusion of an activity, event, or feeling such as ambience, information or respect for privacy. Alternatively, personal satisfaction might be the result of the exclusion of topics of little interest to participants such as religion.

Me gusta venir por el ambiente y el cuidado de niños. Es como un momento de relajamiento para mi y mi esposa mientras aprendemos. (I like to come for the ambience and the childcare. It's like a moment of relaxation for me and my wife while we learn.) (male, 1-year member).

Pues lo que te voy a decir, personalmente, me gusta que toman en cuenta lo que yo digo aquí. También me gusta que no hablamos de religiones. No se meten en las vidas personales. (Well what I'm going to say is that, personally, I like that they take into account what I have to say. I also like that we don't talk about

religions. They don't get involved in our personal lives.) (male, 1-year member).

The personal satisfaction expressed by the participants not only stemmed from the stress-free learning environment for the family who benefitted from the child care, but also the relief of stress the member's experience knowing that they do not have to be concerned with the facilitators intruding on their personal lives, or discussing topics that may be intruding personal beliefs, such as a discussion of religions.

Members attached their personal satisfaction to material perks of the Member's Meetings. A member shared his experience of learning about a program in the Member's Meeting that he believed was too good to be true, but decided to pursue anyway.

Hubo un programa de cambiar tu carro viejo y te daban \$4,000 para un down payment para uno nuevo. Y yo agarre mi carro! Y me callo de sorpresa. Lo necesitaba porque el otro que tenia ya andaba falle y falle y falle, y le metía dinero y le salía otro cosa. La verdad si me sirvió el programa ese. Y no me hubiera enterado si no hubiera venido aquí. (There was a program that allowed you to trade in your old car and they would give you \$4,000 for a down payment for a new car. And I got my car! I needed it because my car had flaw after flaw after flaw and y invested money into it and then it was another thing. The truth is, that program served me. And I wouldn't have found out if I hadn't come here [Member's Meetings]) (male, 1-year member).

All of the participants in this study had a personal experience that they described to give them personal satisfaction. Some credited seeing their ideas put into action in the community to their feelings of personal satisfaction and others credited material benefits, but all of the participants shared the same theme; they find personal satisfaction in attending the Member's Meetings.

Self-efficacy

Another prominent theme the participants introduced was their belief in themselves and in each other, to take on tasks in the community and doing so successfully. As discussed in the literature, people do not need to create actual change in

structural arrangement pertaining to social change in order for them to be empowered, but rather increased self-efficacy to achieve the change, entails empowerment.

Tuvimos unas clases de asma y mucha gente no sabia que ellos podian trabajar con la gente que tiene asma, Y eso me gusto. Porque ya me siento preparada. (We had some Asthma classes and a lot of people didn't know that they themselves could work with people who have asthma. And I liked that. Because now I feel prepared [to work with individuals with asthma]) (female, 8-year member).

Other participants shared more personal narratives about struggles and how they've learned to overcome personal struggles through self-efficacy. One participant testified how she was able to support her grieving son to pursue his education after the family was mourning a huge loss in their life.

Y le dije, 'Papi, no te preocupes, esta vereda, yo te la abro porque yo conozco todo! (And I told him "Papi, don't worry, this pathway, I will clear for you, because I know everything!) (female, 5-year member).

This participant expressed confidence in her son's reintegration in school as it pertained to her notion of the resources available in the community for her son, and her ability to effectively provide linkage for her son to these resources. This participant shared not only believing in herself but also in the facilitators to be her support system through these hard times. Although the participant shared that her son is now a college graduate, she credits her self-efficacy advocating for her son in the community to the support she receives in the Member's Meetings.

Exposure

The participants collectively came to the conclusion that one of the biggest take-aways from attending the Member's Meetings is their exposure not only to community issues but also to the available resources in the community, which results in their increased awareness. One participant expressed the frustration that is commonly felt by

community members when they are not aware of the resources available in the community.

Uno abecés dice, ‘porque no hacen esto?!’, pero ahora se que queda mucho papeleo, sobre todo, pedir esto, y volver a pedir si no lo aceptan. Yo se que es dificil. (We sometimes say, ‘why don’t they do this?!’, but now I know that it’s a lot of paperwork, overall, to request something, then request it again if they don’t accept the first time. I know it’s hard.) (male, 16-year member).

The participants have not just been exposed to resources but also to the processes and protocols required for social change. The participant described how this increased awareness of official procedures decreases his frustration around community issues, such as lack of recreational space, and economic growth, as he now understands that creating change takes time, funding, and persistence.

Muchas veces la comunidad no sabe que es lo que esta pasando o lo que uno puede participar para recibir beneficios. (Often times, the community doesn’t know what is happening or what one can do to participate and receive benefits.) (male, 1-year participant).

The exposure these participants have experienced in the Member’s Meeting, has allowed them to learn about their individual rights as residents of the community but also what is available for them and their families.

Conozco a mas organizaciones y programas que no me daría cuenta si no estuviera involucrado. Son puertas que le abren uno a sus hijos. (I know many more organizations and programs that I wouldn’t know of if I wasn’t involved [in the Member’s Meetings]. Those are doors that we open for our children.) (male, 1-year member).

Evidenced by what the participants shared, this exposure, which results in an increased awareness for the members, transcends not only to their neighbors as they “spread the word,” but also to the new generation: their children.

Accessibility

Amidst the exchange of positive experiences in participating in the Member’s

Meetings, some of the participants also discussed their experiences with unique issues around accessibility to the Member's Meeting. Participants expanded on the limited accessibility to language that many of them experienced. Although the Member's Meetings are described to be facilitated in both Spanish and English, English-only guest speakers have been invited and participants expressed the desire to share in dialogue with them, rather than be translated into the dialogue.

Uno puede hablar pero con acento, pero a uno le da pena abecés no sacar bien las palabras y que se rían de ti. (One can speak [English] but with an accent, but still you're embarrassed sometimes that the words might not come out right and they'll laugh at you.) (female, 11-year member)

Si, es que uno no se a culturizado completamente, para decir 'yo tengo la confianza de estar en una reunión de hablar enfrente en ingles'. Es lo que me agüita. Entiendo lo que dicen pero me falta el dialogo. (Yes, it's because we haven't been acculturated completely, like for me to say 'I have the confidence to be in a reunion and speak in front of everyone in English'. It's what gets me down. I understand what they say but I lack the dialogue [vocabulary].) (male, 6-month member)

The matter discussed here is not the inability to understand English-speaking guest speakers and understand English material, the matter is the desire to engage in the conversation with the guest speakers and be heard and understood in their own voice, rather than their ideas be "translated". This also speaks to their self-efficacy to advocate for themselves.

One participant frequented his sentiment about lack of accessibility as it pertained to his physical disabilities. The participant noted there was an elevator in the building that was accessible to the public however, getting to the elevator itself was a barrier as the doors were described to be "heavy" to open, especially for a person with disabilities. The participant shared that facilitators were inclusive to members and were inviting however his sentiment was around physical accessibility.

Veo que tienen paseos y ellos tienen que ser, con tiempo, algo como para que yo vaya en un bus que sea especial. Como que ellos tienen que hacer todo con tiempo, por eso como que yo sentí la sensación como que busque un lugar donde usted tenga todo eso, como que aquí no. (I see that they have field trips and they have to do, with time, something so that I can go on a bus that's special. Like they have to do everything with time, that's why I kind of felt a sensation like maybe I should look for a place that has all of that, like maybe not here.) (male, 6-month participant).

Other participants discussed accessibility issues around, personal commitments, personal responsibilities, work schedules, and distance, that disrupted their ability to attend the Member's Meetings consistently, but did not discourage their participation.

Empowerment

The participants in the focus groups shared their experiences, which supported Pacoima Beautiful's mission to be an effective external factor at play in the development of empowerment of their members. This process of the development of feelings of increased power were discussed in retrospect, as participants reflected on their past selves before becoming involved in the Member's Meetings, and after.

Yo era una persona que no podía hablar ante la gente, pero Pacoima Beautiful me ah preparado a hablar ante la comunidad. (I was a person who couldn't speak in front of groups of people, but Pacoima Beautiful has prepared me to speak to the community.) (female, 8-year member)

Participants described difficulty speaking not only in front of groups of people, but even speaking to neighbors.

Yo eh aprendido bastante porque yo era un poco tímido para hablar con la gente. Y ahora ya hay mas socialización con migo. (I have learned so much because I was a bit shy to speak to people, but now there's more socialization on my part.) (male, 4-year participant).

Most of the participants appreciated the location of the meetings and how that was also an empowering element of the Member's Meetings by adding influence and feelings

of legitimacy to the participants experience, as they share the neighborhood city hall with key stakeholders interacting in the building.

Estoy muy favorecido que nos toco este edificio, el Pacoima Neighborhood City Hall, porque tenemos muchas personas comprometidas a la comunidad que vienen aquí. (I'm really grateful that we're able to meet in this building, the Pacoima Neighborhood City Hall, because we have so many people dedicated to the community that come through here.) (female, 5-year member)

All of the participants in the focus groups credited Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meetings for the development of these feeling of increased power. One member commented on why she continues to attend these meetings stating,

Hay veces que yo doy una opinión en algo y me dicen 'Okay esta bien, para la otra hacemos eso', o toman tus sugerencias. Unos vienen y otros se van, pero se llevan la experiencia vivida. Ellos no empoderan a participar porque sabemos que también ellos cumplen. (There are times when I give an opinion in something and they tell me 'Okay, it's fine, next time we will do that', or they take our suggestions. Some come and others go, but they take with them their lived experience. They empower us to participate because we know they also deliver.) (female, 5-year member).

The participants feel motivated to make suggestions and be involved in the decision-making process because they have experienced inclusion and reciprocity from the facilitators. This in turn has resulted in the development of empowerment amongst the members.

Leadership

As we explored the participant's personal experiences, the participants contributed to the discussion by sharing their self-perceptions as it pertained to self-esteem, leadership, and leadership abilities, or ability to mobilize and lead community members in social change oriented tasks. When asked about something they have learned from the Member's Meetings that they have applied to their life, participants discussed learning to find their voices and utilizing to lead their communities. As discussed in the

literature, this type of participation in community and political activism not only contribute to the process of empowerment but also the individual's abilities, especially amongst women, in the areas of influence, and leadership (Galambos, 2000; Itzhaky & York, 2000). Not only were the participants identifying themselves as leaders, they were also self-identified women.

Lo que aplico en mi vida es que, si uno no habla, a uno no lo toman en cuenta. (What I apply in my life is that, if you don't speak, no one will take you into account.) (female, 5-year member)

The theme of leadership prevailed amongst the members, as they discussed applying skills they have learned in the Member's Meetings and feeling comfortable engaging in leadership activities and taking initiative to get things done.

Hay gente que me dice necesito esto y esto, y me llaman! 'Donde puedo hacer esto y esto?' y les digo: 'vayan a tocar allí o allá', y corro la voz en la comunidad. (There are people that tell me I need this and this, 'And they call me! 'Where can I do this and this?' and I tell them: 'go knock there or over there', and I spread the word in the community.) (female, 8-year member).

Not only did participants discuss feeling like leaders, they also described being perceived as leaders amongst their neighbors, family, and friends.

Y la gente me dice, 'es que usted es experta!' Y yo les digo, 'yo se mucho, pero no soy experta de nada! Yo lucho por mi comunidad, si no me quieren agradecer, ni modo. Ya se darán cuenta. Es muy duro trabajar en la comunidad, muy duro. Pero yo lo hago porque me gusta. (And people tell me, 'It's because you're an expert!' and I tell them, 'I know plenty, but I'm not an expert of anything!' I fight for my community, if people don't want to thank me for it, it's fine. They will soon realize. It's hard working in the community, real hard. But I do it because I like it.) (female, 10-year member).

These participants acquired leadership skills and have applied them in their life, however it was evident that the women in the focus groups had also acquired a leadership identity in the community through this socialization.

SECTION 5

DISCUSSION

The participants in this focus group were not only able to discuss their experiences learning new skills, feeling empowered, and discussing the cohesiveness felt amongst themselves, they also demonstrated it. However, those that disclosed having been members of Pacoima Beautiful for a longer amount of time were more forthcoming and enthusiastic to share their experiences than were members who have been participating for a year or less. For example, those that described being members for four years or more were more likely to take initiative to answer questions first, during the focus groups, while newer members snow-balled off the original answers and provided supporting statements.

Regardless of the years participated, the researcher observed that all participants were very supportive and respectful of one another during the focus group, which spoke to their described cohesion felt in the Member's Meetings. It was evident that cohesion experienced in the Member's Meetings transcended into the community when the members encountered one another: in this case, the focus groups. This experienced cohesion is what the participants continued to describe to be the reason they continue participating in the Member's Meetings.

Along with this observed cohesion, the empowerment and leadership skills they described were evident even in small focus groups where the members naturally advocated for themselves and their community, spoke to a stranger-researcher with ease, and supported each other through this process. For example, members became emotional as they described growing personally and feeling "safe" to support their

families through hard times after their increased awareness in the Member's Meetings. Participants quickly chimed in to reassure each other they were there for support and ready to help in any area where there was need.

In terms of personal satisfaction and participation, there was no difference amongst the member in terms of years participated or sex and gender. All participants could identify personal benefits and satisfaction they felt from participating in the Member's Meetings. For example, some of the newer members appreciated the childcare as they felt they could learn without worrying about their children for a few hours, while those who participated for longer appreciated being considered a resource by staff and by their community.

Notable differences were observed amongst the members in terms of their described developed empowerment and leadership abilities as it pertained to their self-identified gender. Although men also shared their experiences as feeling empowered and more informed or aware of community resources, women expressed more pride in themselves as they described themselves as leaders in the community and also described being perceived as leaders by their community. These findings are in accord with past research that women of low socioeconomic status can be empowered and *are* willing to participate in their communities (Itzhaky & York, 2000).

The comfortable forum provided by the Member's Meetings and the leadership activities they engage their member's in, contributed to the leadership development in these participants. This is in accord with previous research discussed, that individuals, but especially women, require a safe and comfortable context to engage in leadership activities to strengthen their leadership development. Local organizations are considered

effective community settings to empower communities and provide communities with leadership abilities because they are distinguished from other settings by the clarity of their goals, missions, and visions. In their experience, and through their narratives, the participants in this study have shown Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meetings to be an effective program for empowering their members and providing them with leadership abilities.

Limitations

The findings of this program evaluation are not generalizable to all communities or members of community based organizations across different cultures. Past research found that women have been found to have more inclination to community participation, which may or may not lead to empowerment, than males (Gutierrez, 1990; Itzhaky & York, 2000), and the results from the current study are congruent with that previous literature. Similarly, it was previously reported by facilitators of the Member's Meetings that the program is meant to be inclusive of men and women; however, there is a larger presence of women in the monthly Member's Meeting. This suggests that findings of the focus groups may not be representative of members since focus group participants comprised of 60% males and 40% females.

Implications for Social Work

Social workers should be aware of community-based organizations, such as Pacoima Beautiful, or other community organizing initiatives that are effective empowering community settings and hold a core group of participants. These settings are distinguished from other settings by the clarity of their goals, missions, and visions of simultaneously building community power, promoting the psychological empowerment

of participants, and providing leadership skills. Social workers must be aware that such groups exist and support such groups and use them as resources to work towards a greater good: creating positive social change.

Recommendations for Future Research

Longitudinal studies should be done using the participants of the Member's Meetings to determine long lasting, personal and social benefits experienced by the members, after participating at Pacoima Beautiful. These longitudinal findings can determine the possibility of Pacoima Beautiful's Member's Meeting's, mission, goals, curriculum, and modalities, to become future evidence-based practices used to effectively empower communities and providing community members with leadership abilities.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Themes from focus groups regarding empowerment and leadership

Questions	Theme
Why did you begin to attend/continue to participate in the Member's Meeting?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity • Personal interest and benefit • Motivation to become involved in the community
What skills have you learned at the Member's Meeting that you have or will apply to your life?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness of self in the community • Increased awareness of community resources • Increased personal satisfaction through community involvement • Motivation to help their community • How to be a voice in the community • Leadership skills (organizing, recruiting) • Effective advocacy techniques
What are you doing in present day that you did not do prior to being involved in the Member's Meeting?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Speaking • Advocating for environmental justice • Spreading awareness of environmental injustices
What about the member's meeting do you enjoy most?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referring friends to neighborhood services • Engaging and participating in community events • Being exposed to key stakeholders • Opportunity for community dialogue

Table 1. (continued)

Questions	Theme
Are there any barriers that prevent you from coming to every Member's Meetings?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barrier accesibility • Commuting • Handicap accessibility • Familial responsibilities • Work schedules
Do you feel supported by the staff facilitating the members meeting? If so how, if no, why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohesion • Inclusivity • Consideration • Reciprocity
Would you recommend friends to the Member's Meeting, if so, why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent recruitment • Advocacy
Do your family and friends support you attending the Member's Meeting?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading by example • Community support
What do you get from coming to the Member's Meeting that you can't find anywhere else in the community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-efficacy to help community • Increased Awareness of different issues • Personal satisfaction • Valuable • Influential