

## More Than Help? Volunteerism in US Latino Culture

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**Abstract** Volunteerism makes critical contributions to individual lives and society as a whole. However, to date, few studies have investigated volunteerism within Latino communities, a large and growing US population. The aim of this study was to understand how non-metropolitan US Latinos perceive volunteerism, as well as to determine what motivates and what deters their participation in volunteer programs. Our research team conducted six focus groups with 36 Latina women living in the State of Illinois. The focus groups covered topics such as the definition of volunteerism, participation motives and barriers, personal volunteer experience, and

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Latino culture, community, and organizations. We also assessed demographic information. Results from this study indicate that Latinas have a unique understanding of the concept of volunteerism. Participants associated everyday “helping” with volunteerism, establishing commonplace forms of aid as perhaps a “Latino way of volunteering.” We found time-consuming activities such as family responsibilities and work to be deterrents to Latinas participating in more formal volunteer activities.

**Résumé** Les individus et la société en général profitent grandement des retombées du bénévolat. Peu d'études ont cependant été menées à date sur le bénévolat au sein des communautés latinophones, une vaste population des É.-U. en croissance. Le but de la présente étude était de comprendre comment les Latinos-Américains des banlieues des É.-U. perçoivent le volontariat, ainsi que de cerner ce qui motive et mitige leur participation aux programmes de bénévolat. Notre équipe de recherche a dirigé six groupes de discussion comptant 36 Latinos-Américaines vivant dans l'État de l'Illinois. Ces groupes ont discuté de différents sujets, dont de la définition du bénévolat, de facteurs de motivation et d'obstacle à la participation, d'expériences bénévoles personnelles et de culture, communauté et organisations latinophones. Nous avons aussi évalué des données démographiques. Les résultats de cette étude démontrent que les Latinos-Américaines ont une compréhension unique du concept de bénévolat. Les participantes associaient « l'aide » apportée sur une base quotidienne au bénévolat, définissant ainsi des formes d'assistance courantes comme éventuel « geste latinophone bénévole ». Nous avons découvert que les activités chronophages comme les tâches familiales et le travail dissuadaient les Latinos-Américaines à participer à des activités bénévoles plus formelles.

**Zusammenfassung** Im Rahmen ehrenamtlicher Tätigkeiten werden wichtige Beiträge für das Leben Einzelner sowie für die Gesellschaft insgesamt geleistet. Allerdings haben bis heute nur wenige Studien die ehrenamtliche Arbeit in lateinamerikanischen Gemeinden untersucht, einer großen und wachsenden Bevölkerungsgruppe in den USA. Ziel dieser Studie war es, zu einem Verständnis darüber zu gelangen, welche Einstellung Lateinamerikaner, die außerhalb großer U.S.-Städte leben, zu ehrenamtlichen Tätigkeiten haben, und zu bestimmen, was sie zur Teilnahme an ehrenamtlichen Programmen motiviert oder davon abhält. Unser Forschungsteam arbeitete mit sechs Fokusgruppen bestehend aus 36 lateinamerikanischen Frauen aus dem U.S.-Bundesstaat Illinois. Die Fokusgruppen behandelten Themen wie die Definition von ehrenamtlicher Arbeit, Motive und Hindernisse für ein Engagement, persönliche Erfahrung mit ehrenamtlicher Arbeit und lateinamerikanische Kultur, Gemeinschaft und Organisationen. Zudem wurden demografische Informationen ausgewertet. Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie zeigen, dass lateinamerikanische Frauen ein einzigartiges Verständnis über das Konzept der ehrenamtlichen

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Arbeit haben. Die Teilnehmerinnen verbanden tägliches „Helfen“ mit ehrenamtlicher Arbeit und erklärten generelle Formen der Hilfe vielleicht als eine „lateinamerikanische Art des ehrenamtlichen Engagements“. Es zeigte sich, dass zeitaufwendige Tätigkeiten, wie familiäre Verpflichtungen und Arbeit, die lateinamerikanischen Frauen daran hinderten, sich formell ehrenamtlich zu engagieren.

**Resumen** El voluntariado realiza contribuciones cruciales a las vidas de los individuos y a la sociedad como un todo. Sin embargo, hasta la fecha, pocos estudios han investigado el voluntariado en las comunidades latinas, una amplia y creciente población estadounidense. El objetivo del presente estudio era comprender cómo los latinos estadounidenses no metropolitanos perciben el voluntariado, así como también determinar qué motiva y qué impide su participación en programas de voluntariado. Nuestro equipo de investigación dirigió seis grupos focales con 36 mujeres latinas que viven en el Estado de Illinois. Los grupos focales cubrieron temas tales como la definición de voluntariado, los motivos y las barreras para participar, la experiencia personal del voluntario, y la cultura, la comunidad y las organizaciones latinas. También evaluamos información demográfica. Los resultados de este estudio indican que las latinas tienen una comprensión singular del concepto de voluntariado. Los participantes asociaron la “ayuda” diaria con el voluntariado, estableciendo formas de ayuda comunes y corrientes como una “forma latina de voluntariado”. Encontramos que actividades prolongadas, como las responsabilidades familiares y el trabajo, disuadían a las latinas de participar en actividades de voluntariado más formales.

**Keywords** Volunteerism · Latinos · Hispanics · Minorities · Non-metropolitan

## Introduction

Volunteering for the benefit of individuals, social organizations, and society at large has long been a part of society in the United States (US) (Snyder and Omoto 2008). Former president Jimmy Carter once said, “*Throughout my life, I’ve seen the difference that volunteering efforts can make in people’s lives. I know the personal value of service as a local volunteer.*” Whatever the service is, volunteerism has the potential to significantly impact individuals, communities, and even entire nations. Volunteerism fills the gaps in services and programs that rely on fluctuating and ever-shrinking funding (Snyder and Omoto 2008; Van Slyke 2003), making it possible to provide service and aid to those who need it most. It is not only non-profit organizations that rely on the contributions of volunteers, but churches, government agencies, and for-profit companies. Individuals also benefit greatly from their services.

The definition of volunteerism has been linked strongly to *altruism*, that is, caring for others and having the desire to increase their well-being (Haski-Leventhal 2009). Many individuals believe that for an activity to be considered “volunteering,” it must involve some aspect of altruism. Therefore, Bussell and Forbes (2002) claim that a person who performs an activity for others without pay in order to avoid a

punishment or other negative consequence is considered an “involuntary volunteer,” and thus his or her contribution is not viewed as true volunteerism. The social action of volunteerism includes all behaviors individuals engage in that benefit other individuals, social movements, larger communities, and the overall societies in which they exist (Snyder and Omoto 2008). However, this definition may not be inclusive of all populations and cultures. In interviews with Latinos, Moua (2010) found that many of these individuals felt strongly about helping others who were struggling but did not know whether such everyday offers of aid were considered “volunteering,” as they were not performed through a specific organization or during an allotted period of time. Similarly, in some Latin American countries, the concept of volunteerism is viewed only as a system of wealthy individuals helping the poor. This often leads immigrants, who often are not part of the upper class, to believe that their contributions do not fit into the definition of volunteerism (Hobbs 2001). Given these perspectives, Carson states that it is inherently unfair to make a direct comparison between formal and informal, or structured and unstructured, volunteerism, as it is clear that some groups participate in one more than the other although both are valuable to society (Carson 1999). A system and definition that reinforces the idea that informal volunteering is not as important as formal volunteering can potentially discourage minority populations from participating in volunteer activities (Moua 2010). Additionally, while underserved traditionally (Wiley and Ebata 2004), Latinos and other persons of color are more often seen as the recipients of volunteer work, rather than as volunteers themselves. This idea further complicates the meaning of volunteerism for Latinos, as organizations do not often recruit them to carry out volunteer activities (Moua 2010).

When looking at the trends in volunteer activity in American society, it is thus crucial to consider the issue from different cultural perspectives. For example, Boyle and Sawyer (2010) report that there are few African American volunteers. However, it only appears this way when one uses a traditional definition of volunteerism. Some of the participants in their study stated that they invited struggling relatives to live in their homes, a volunteering of private property that may not count as volunteerism according to researchers adhering to traditional definitional criteria for volunteer activities (Boyle and Sawyer 2010). Another study sought to discover how Mexican volunteers interact with the populations they assist (Butcher 2003). Researchers created a distinction between “helping” and “serving” relationships. A “helping” relationship is essentially one-sided, with the helped party relying on the helping party and receiving a benefit, while the helping party simply completes tasks without any personal gain. A “serving” relationship, on the other hand, refers to the idea of a mutual relationship between two parties where both receive something positive from the other. The researchers in Butcher’s study found that the majority of Mexican volunteers developed serving relationships with those they were assisting; many of them stated that through volunteering they not only gave to another person, but they also received intrinsic benefits such as a sense of purpose, personal growth, and a greater capacity to learn from others. This was inconsistent with the researchers’ prediction that a helping relationship would form more often than a serving one (Butcher 2003). Clearly, a cross-cultural perspective on volunteerism presents a complex portrait of what counts as a volunteer activity.

Aside from the studies mentioned above, little research has been conducted investigating the definitions, motivations, and deterrents of volunteering among varying ethnic groups, especially the US Latino population. Language barriers and the diverse definitions of volunteerism that Latinos report further complicate the issue. However, as the demographics of the US continue to shift, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the ways in which volunteers of different cultural backgrounds perceive volunteerism. In 2014, Latinos made up 17.4 % of the US population. By 2060, this percentage is projected to increase to 28.6 (Colby and Ortman 2015). Latinos are often placed in low-wage jobs and this is especially true for those living in non-metropolitan or “nonmetro” (that is, rural or small-town) areas (Kandel and Newman 2004). According to the 2013 Census, the median income in Hispanic households was \$40,963 (versus \$58,270 in non-Hispanic White households) and the poverty rate among Hispanics was 23.5 % (vs 9.6 % among non-Hispanic Whites). In total, 12.7 million Hispanics are affected by this income and poverty disparity (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2014). Parisi and Lichter (2007) and Millard et al. (2004) reported on the significant influence that Latinos have on the social and demographic makeup of non-metro America. According to the authors, had Latinos not moved to non-metro areas, more than 200 rural counties would have shrunk in population during the early 2000s. Latinos are transforming the social and economic fabric of many small towns, where they have come to work in the food processing, agriculture, and construction industries. Greater Latino participation in volunteerism in these areas can be an effective way of promoting community integration (Wuthnow 2013). Latino volunteers possess the cultural sensitivity and respect to not only gain the trust of other Latinos in their communities but also to teach these skills to other volunteers, whether Latino or not (May and Contreras 2007). Latino volunteers offer diverse perspectives and skill sets that can greatly benefit existing volunteer organizations, but their successful participation depends on the organization’s ability to acknowledge Latino definitions of volunteerism and the role everyday volunteering plays in Latino communities. Thus, it is necessary to gather data from several different populations in order to accurately and inclusively reflect how volunteerism is defined and carried out in the US. From a qualitative standpoint, this study investigates Latinos’ perceptions of volunteering, as well as the factors motivating and deterring them to volunteer.

## Methods

In order to understand Latinos’ perceptions of volunteering, we adopted a community-based participatory research (CBPR) theoretical framework. Hacker (2013) describes CBPR as a method of using community engagement to create an effective translational process that will increase bidirectional connections between academics and the communities they study. This approach is particularly useful for addressing emergent problems in community research that have yet to be widely discussed in the literature (Hacker 2013). Hacker (2013) also argues that CBPR is exceptionally helpful in the formative phase of research when little is known about a

topic area (Hacker 2013). Indeed, Cristancho et al. (2008) describe a study they conducted in which they used a CBPR approach to facilitate the ability to reach and study a group of rural, Hispanic immigrants. These researchers surmised that building research credibility might be especially important among immigrants, and were able to achieve this goal through the use of CBPR (Christopher et al. 2008). Building on the successes of such studies, we used the CBPR framework to engage Latino community members in partnership with university researchers in an attempt to find common ground on the topic of volunteerism.

We chose to apply this CBPR framework in focus group interviews. Focus groups have been used successfully in the past with minority groups (Barbour 2013; Quintanilha et al. 2015), and specifically with Latinos (Lam et al. 2013; LongLong et al. 2012; Rhodes et al. 2015; Valdez et al. 2015). Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2004) argue that focus groups are especially useful for data collection when there is a power differential between respondents and researchers, which is often the case in studies on US Latinos. Focus groups can diffuse intimidation by providing a setting in which respondents feel that they are the experts and the researchers are learning from them. Surrounded by other Latinos in a focus group setting, respondents feel more comfortable sharing their experiences, and more confident that their experiences are significant and worth sharing (Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca 2004). Additional studies confirm that focus groups make participants feel more comfortable than one-on-one interviews (Ayon 2013), and develop non-threatening, non-judgmental spaces in which respondents who normally do not feel empowered to do so can freely express themselves (Barbour 2013; Quintanilha et al. 2015). For these reasons, focus groups were an ideal choice for applying our CBPR theoretical framework.

## Participants

Thirty-six Latina women living in predominantly non-metro Latino communities in Illinois participated in this study. In this study, the term “Latino” refers to individuals with Spanish speaking ancestors whose origins are in South America, Central America, or islands in the Caribbean. We chose to focus this study on women since women volunteer at a higher rate than men across major US demographic characteristics (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014) and volunteering patterns are different among women and men (Taniguchi 2006). We felt that including both men and women, and therefore having to account for the differences in volunteer patterns between genders, was too unwieldy for this preliminary study. Moreover, the women participants did their best to reflect the attitudes of their Latino communities at large. That being said, a future study should be devoted to men, which can fully devote attention to the unique perspectives of their gender.

Local organizations (e.g., University of Illinois Extension offices, Multicultural Centers) serving Latinos in three sites (Sterling, Beardstown, and Rantoul) assisted with the recruitment of participants for the focus groups by distributing flyers, making announcements at meetings, and networking personal connections. Eligible participants demonstrated an interest in discussing their perspectives on Latino culture and volunteerism. The recruitment process did not discriminate between Latina immigrants

and US-born Latinas, nor did it discriminate based on household income. The participants were not paid, but refreshments were provided during the focus groups.

The final sample consisted of women who self-identified as Latinas, and who ranged from 19 to 56 years of age with a mean of 39.6 years (Table 1). Most women were first-generation immigrants (93.5 %), born in Mexico (75 %), who had arrived in the US during their adult lives ( $M = 23.1$  years). Between 83 and 89 % reported speaking or reading only Spanish or Spanish better than English, and the average amount of schooling was 8.7 years. All women had children ( $M = 3.1$  children), and more than half were married or living with a significant other (69.4 %). The majority of the women considered themselves religious with 72 % identifying as Catholic. Just over half (52.8 %) were currently employed, working on average 35.6 h per week, and many women (51 %) reported household incomes lower than \$15,000 per year. A minority (11 %) reported being in poor or fair health status. In response to the general question, “have you volunteered in the past year?”, less than half (41.7 %) reported doing so.

## Data Collection

Researchers conducted six focus groups in Spanish at local community centers, schools, or church halls. The focus groups were audio-recorded, clocking an average

**Table 1** Characteristics of participants in the focus groups ( $N = 36$ )

	% or Mean (SD; Range)
Age (years)	39.6 (9.2; 19–56)
Mexico born <sup>a</sup>	75.0
First-generation immigrant	93.5
Age at arrival in the U.S. (years)	23.1 (10.5; 4–34)
SPEAK only Spanish or Spanish better than English	89
READ only Spanish or Spanish better than English	83.8
Formal education (years)	8.7 (3.3; 0–14)
Roman Catholic <sup>b</sup>	72.2
Married/living with significant other <sup>c</sup>	69.4
Children <sup>d</sup>	3.1 (1.6; 1–10)
Volunteer experience in the past year <sup>e</sup>	41.7
Employed <sup>f</sup>	52.8
Worked hours/week	35.6 (14.8; 20–80)
Household annual income > 15,000	51.0
Fair or poor health status	11.2

<sup>a</sup> Nine women were born in U.S., Honduras, Puerto Rico, or Guatemala

<sup>b</sup> Other religion ( $N = 10$ ) reported were Christian, Pentecostal, Evangelical, or none

<sup>c</sup> Six women were divorced and five single

<sup>d</sup> All women had children

<sup>e</sup> Mainly through school or religion organizations

<sup>f</sup> Employed in restaurant/food service, labor, agriculture, cleaning, or school

duration of 70 min. Three to eight Latinas joined each of the focus groups. During the focus groups, researchers asked participants about their perceptions of volunteerism and what the term “volunteerism” meant to them as Latinos. To elicit participants’ perspectives on and experiences with the concept of “volunteerism,” we posed a series of open-ended interview questions pertaining to topics such as the conceptualization of the term, roles of volunteers, motives for volunteering (e.g., opportunity for acquiring better jobs, personal growth and self-esteem, role model for the community, altruism, networking and social support), participants’ impressions of volunteer activity in their country of origin and in the US, challenges and best practices (e.g., most difficult, type of support needed, training, certification), and general perceptions of volunteerism among the broad US Latino culture, communities, and organizations (e.g., motives, barriers, role of community organizations and family). We developed the interview questions based on the literature on volunteerism in the US and Latin America. Initially, we only consulted literature that focused on Latinos and US minorities (e.g., Boyle and Sawyer 2010; Hobbs 2001; Moua 2010), but the literature review soon expanded to include studies on volunteerism among mainstream US communities (e.g., Brudney 1999; Snyder and Omoto 2008; Carson 1999; Hustinx et al. 2010).

The Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign approved the study. We obtained a statement of informed consent from all participants before data collection.

## Overview of Study Sites

The three non-metro study sites in Illinois in which we conducted the focus groups were Beardstown, Sterling, and Rantoul. Each of these towns has experienced a notable increase in their Latino populations in recent years, which is why we chose these study locations. As noted in the introduction, focusing on study sites with an expanding Latino population has the benefit of producing results that are relevant to the constantly shifting demographics of the US as a whole. The results we obtained from our three study sites with increasing Latino populations, therefore, can offer a helpful rubric for future studies assessing cultural perspectives among the increasing number of US communities with shifting demographic makeups.

The recent rise in the Latino population in Beardstown is due in large part to the 1987 re-opening of a hog meatpacking plant and the town’s subsequent recruitment of plant workers from Mexico. Likewise, Sterling attracts Latinos to work for its multiple manufacturing companies. And in Rantoul, many of the Latino residents are migrant farmers who settled permanently in the community. The Latino population in Beardstown, Sterling, and Rantoul range from 33, to 24, to 10 %, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2010, 2012). These communities have a notably higher percentage of Latinos than the surrounding areas, and could be considered Latino “ethnic enclaves.” According to Portes (1981), Latino ethnic enclaves have the potential to organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market in addition to the general population. While the positive and negative effects of belonging to an ethnic enclave are still debated, Xie and Gough (2011) found that the main effect of the ethnic enclave on Mexican wages is negative. Driven by



working opportunities, most Latino residents of the three study sites follow this trend, working an average of between 31 and 36 h a week, with annual household income of more than \$15,000 for 71–88 % of Latino families. Latinos living in the three site are young, with a mean age of 25 years. Across sites, between 15 and 20 % of Latinos are first-generation immigrants, most of whom are from Mexico. More than half (56–85 %) speak English not at all or not well, and 57–83 % have a high school education or less. The average number of children across the sites is 2.2, and 28–41 % of Latinos in these areas are married or living with a significant other.

In addition to illustrating the diversity across the three sites, this demographic information underscores complex contexts that are not always favorable to volunteerism. For example, low English proficiency and a general lack of familiarity with US culture is common among first-generation Latino immigrants (American Psychological Association and Presidential Task Force on Immigration 2012; Christmas and Barker 2014) and may prevent many from social and civic engagement (Mora 2013). The populations' youth, financial motivations, low education, and burden of raising children, sometimes without a spouse, are all factors that combine to de-prioritize familiarizing oneself with and participating in cultures of volunteerism (American Psychological Association & Presidential Task Force on Immigration 2012; Mora 2013). Moreover, this de-prioritization is further exacerbated by the fact that half of our study participants earned low-income status versus an average of 29 % or less among Latino populations in their own towns. Since volunteerism is often viewed as a system in which wealthy individuals help the poor (Hobbs 2001), it is unlikely that our participants had had any prior interest in participating in formal volunteer activities. It is important to account for how these factors influence perceptions of volunteerism among growing Latino populations in the US, as doing so can provide helpful strategies for confronting and overcoming cultural and conceptual barriers to volunteerism in a variety of US regions with similarly shifting cultural demographics.

## Data Analysis

Three Spanish speaking investigators transcribed all of the interviews from audio recording devices, checked each other's transcription for accuracy, and analyzed the interviews using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcribers observed the focus groups and took notes on participants' voices and other identifying traits to help the transcription process go more smoothly. Researchers aided the transcribers in this regard by asking participants at the beginning of the focus groups to introduce themselves using a pseudonym and briefly remark upon how they preferred to spend their time. Initially, each investigator separately coded and analyzed the data using Nvivo10 software (QSR International 2014) to look for themes. Subsequently, the team compared codes to verify agreement, retaining only those themes that the majority of investigators coded and that the entire team unanimously agreed upon after extensive discussion. For example, agreed codes that informed the second theme listed in the results below, "Desire to help," included "altruism," "helpers," "help is volunteerism for Latinos," and "help (pay) back." The final themes thus represented the perspectives of the majority of participants.

When negative cases arose, the team discussed each case, using them as an opportunity to further refine each theme (Patton 2002). A team of bicultural native Spanish and English speakers then translated the quotations (listed below in the “results”) through a translation/back-translation process for retaining semantic equivalence across languages (Behling and Law 2000; Santo et al. 2015). This team reviewed each quotation for conceptual and normative equivalence (adapting and dropping items as needed to address cultural fit and social norms). In addition, the team performed statistical analyses to assess participant characteristics using the IBM SPSS Statistics software v. 22 (IBM, n.d.).

## Results

Findings indicate that Latina participants in this study had a unique understanding of the concept of volunteerism. Related to more traditional organized volunteering is the informal act of “helping,” which participants positively associated with Latino culture and with feelings of satisfaction. During the focus groups, participants pointed out their priorities for spending time with family and working as major deterrents to participation in volunteer activity. Our experience in this study confirmed the literature on the advantages of focus groups as we observed that Latina participants were able to talk freely and none of them refused to answer any questions. During the focus groups, our participants were engaged, asked follow-up questions, and expressed their points of view. The focus groups thus facilitated the goal of CBPR, engaging Latino community members and researchers alike in an amicable setting for reaching common ground on a topic (in this case, volunteerism). Findings are presented below, with section headings labeled by theme. Results were consistent across all three study sites. Pseudonyms and brief demographic information that identify the speakers of the quotations are included to support our findings.

### Lack of Familiarity

Volunteerism as conceived in the larger US (middle-class, college-educated) culture does not resonate with the Latino culture of our study’s respondents. When viewed as formal and structured helping, volunteerism, according to most participants, is not common or natural within Latino communities. The Latina participants saw their communities more as the beneficiaries of volunteer activities rather than the benefactors. As Regina, a 38-year-old with two children who emigrated from Mexico at age 22, put it, “*usually, we always receive help from others...it is very rare to see us taking the initiative ourselves. We are always receiving from others.*” As a result of their dearth of experience acting as volunteers, Latina participants had limited understanding of how to navigate the volunteer system and had little knowledge of volunteer opportunities in their community. Patricia, a 44-year-old mother of three who emigrated from Mexico at age 17, articulated this sentiment when she said, “*unfortunately, I am not very familiar knowing how I can help,*” and

Juliana, a 46-year-old with five children who emigrated from Mexico at age 25, corroborated when she said, *“I don’t know where I can do volunteer work.”* Despite such instances of articulating their lack of familiarity with volunteer work and volunteer opportunities, participants could identify Latinos in their communities who were volunteers.

When discussing the definition of volunteerism, participants often resorted to describing what an ideal volunteer looks like. A long list of outstanding qualities painted a picture of a gifted person with extremely high standards—a person who seemed out of reach to most participants. Descriptions ranged from an altruist who is able to forego his/her own needs, to a charismatic leader who has the free time to share his/her talents, to a sociable extrovert with exceptional English-language skills, to someone who is fit and healthy, to someone who is well known in the community. Most participants highlighted personality traits of a volunteer. As Elena, a 36-year-old with three children who emigrated from Mexico at age 21, said, *“a volunteer is like a leader, and having people follow you.”* Marisa, a 40-year-old mother of one who emigrated from Mexico at age 26, added, *“a volunteer is someone who has the time and talent.”* *“Generally speaking, volunteers are people that are sociable and extroverted, and that makes volunteer work easier for them,”* complemented Regina. However, some participants also noted that physical health was important for volunteering. Patricia, for example, said that *“a volunteer has to be a person in good shape and healthy.”* Taking these descriptions as a whole, Latinas painted a picture of a volunteer as someone almost “out of reach,” thereby practically excluding themselves from this role. These qualities indicate potential conceptual discrepancies about volunteerism that are worth investigating since they might affect Latinas’ awareness of and willingness to participate in volunteer activities.

As the above results indicate, the participants clearly drew on a range of criteria to determine what counts and what does not count as volunteer activity. They used metrics ranging from how much time is required to perform volunteer activities, to what schedule does volunteering require, to how do volunteer activities differ from everyday forms of voluntary aid. Based on this range of metrics, it seems there was no clear consensus among respondents regarding what quantitative and qualitative criteria should be used to classify an offer of help as a volunteer activity. Nor were participants necessarily in agreement even when using similar metrics. For example, Marta, a 29-year-old with two children who emigrated from Mexico at age 15, and Juliana both focused on regularity of schedule as a requisite for volunteer activity. Marta said, *“It cannot be volunteer work, because, for example, I say ‘this weekend I am going to do it,’ but probably next Friday I cannot.”* Juliana likewise said, *“I would say that volunteering is like a job, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday.”* Francisca, a 39-year-old with two children who emigrated from Mexico at age 20, and Aida, a 42-year-old with three children who emigrated from Mexico at age 22, however, still assessed volunteer activity according to schedule, but did not feel routine regularity was significant. Francisca said, *“actually, I had volunteer work to do today. But today I came here, and I said I cannot go...I do not feel forced nor compelled to do it.”* Aida likewise said, *“now I help in the catechesis course which is every Wednesday during the year. They [children] are counting on me to have the*

classes. *It is like a routine...but sometimes I cannot go, sometimes for 1 month, and then they are going to call and say 'could you help' because there is no other person to run the classes...I think that both situations are different, but both are volunteer work.*" This lack of consensus regarding what types of activities do and do not count as volunteerism has the potential to undermine Latinas' ability to recognize opportunities for and participate in volunteer activities.

## Desire to Help

Another important theme that arose from the narratives is the high degree of satisfaction Latinos get from spontaneously helping others. Participants expressed how gratified they feel when they make a difference in someone's life or improve their community. "Helping" is major part of Latino culture, and one could construe this as a "Latino way of volunteering." The concept of altruism is central to Latino understandings of helping, and cultivates the belief that one's own needs are secondary to the needs of others. Many participants referred to volunteer activities as actions performed "*de corazón*" (from the heart), which suggests that they do not require compensation or payment in return. Carla, a 30-year-old with three children who emigrated from Mexico at age 21, supported this theme when she said, "*it is like the desire to help, like improving church, schools and community. The desire to improve. Helping to improve the place where you are working as a volunteer.*" Paloma, a 37-year-old with two children who emigrated from Puerto Rico at age 30, corroborated when she said, "*it is born from the heart...right? I want to help them...I want to be there...So, you say 'I can help them', and it is nice...one does it from the heart.*" Marisa added, highlighting the lack of financial motivation for helping, "*I can help you; I do not need you to pay me...I want to help you...I do it from my heart.*" Gabriela, a 31-year-old with four children who emigrated from Guatemala at age 20, further supported the notion of helping "*de corazón*," saying "*it feels good because you are helping, even with a little. But, it is good that you are helping with the heart.*" Although such motives for "helping" traditionally do not fall under the category of formal volunteerism, these quotations demonstrate that Latinas are certainly familiar with and motivated to serve through informal modes of volunteerism.

Participants further reported that supporting fellow Latinos who are disadvantaged is an integral part of Latino culture. Participants discussed the importance of "*vuelta de mano*" (return or paying back) as a way of expressing deep gratitude to those who helped them and their families in the past when they were struggling with loneliness and financial difficulties, among other problems. Once their burdens are lightened, struggling Latinos want to pay back the community for their aid. As Maisa, a 33-year-old with three children who emigrated from Mexico at age 24, said, "*I have experienced difficult and sad situations. I have needed help from people...and thanks to God, I have met good people on my path. That is why now I want to return, helping others who need.*" Even if participants benefited from standard social services, such as schooling and childcare, they felt a need to express some form of repayment or thanks. As Juliana said, "*Well...at least, in the school, I*

*felt that this [volunteer work] was a “thank you” to a teacher...because she taught my son and I thank her, giving her something that she needed during the day...so she could help more children...I helped her.”* Ines, a 40-year-old with two children who emigrated from Mexico at age 24, summed up the sentiment behind “*vuelta de mano*” best when she said, “*we have received a lot of support, some have to give what we receive.*” These quotations indicate that “*vuelta de mano*” might be an important motive for “volunteering to help” among Latino immigrants, given participants’ high degree of gratefulness for the help they received in the past and for the positive influence community services have had on their lives and families.

However, the manifestation of the desire to help is often limited to activities with which Latinos already have experience and know how to do. For example, cleaning, caregiving, and singing are the kinds of services Latina women are familiar providing and in which they have developed expertise. Thus, Latinos are more likely to “volunteer to help” when they have previous knowledge of or experience with the activities to be performed. As Carla mentioned, “*well...I think that it [volunteering] is helping with the knowledge that you have or with the work that you do...to help people to get informed about something that they do not know.*” Marisa corroborated by saying, “*there were four families who were in charge of cleaning the church. Every time that it was her (her grandmother) turn, I was with her. And she was the one who taught me to clean...So I think that one does what one was instilled to do.*” Helen, a 51-year-old mother of five who emigrated from Mexico at age 5, associated volunteering with activities with which she was already familiar and that were a part of her daily life: “*or visiting a sick person or visiting families that have a sick person at home [in relation to what was understood as volunteerism]...visiting someone who needs a conversation or a visit...doing an activity, making some food...selling something to collect money for a person that needs it.*” These quotations indicate that Latinas are willing to help/volunteer if what was being asked of them gave them the opportunity to hone skills they had already acquired in their everyday lives, rather than a chance to learn new things.

## **Lack of Time**

When discussing why Latinos are not able to get more involved in volunteer activities, participants cited the time pressures of family and work as significant deterrents. Latina women, especially, play an important familial role in their communities, which involves many obligations including childcare, household chores, and other domestic tasks. These family services are time-consuming and require extensive dedication and care. Patricia highlighted this theme when she said, “*well, I think the barrier to volunteering is that there is no time. Sometimes after work, you get home very tired. And then, you have to take care of the family.*” Helen also noted the pressures of work and family, citing, as a reason for not doing volunteer work, “*lacking time...because I worked and then, the kids.*” Natalia, a 38-year-old with two children who emigrated from Mexico at age 20, likewise said, “*many of Latinos...most of us have to work and do not have time available...and if they have time, it is limited to taking care of the house, the children.*” Lourdes, a

41-year-old mother of four who emigrated from Mexico at age 25, spoke of feeling torn between the desire to help others and the need to care for her family: *“for example, we, as moms, can say ‘it’s good to be volunteers.’ But, sometimes we have problems with a baby. Baby can get sick or have an appointment with a doctor and sadly...then we cannot help.”* Since familial roles are a high priority for these Latina women, family needs can be overwhelming, time-consuming deterrents to volunteering.

Relatedly, participants reported not having time to volunteer because they work exhaustive hours in order to pay their expenses and provide financial support for their families. Indeed, many of them mentioned that they are in the US because of the opportunities the country offers them to work to support their families. Some participants even indicated having multiple jobs to cover their expenses. Many also believe that volunteers do not otherwise work or have only part time jobs. Ultimately, those who work full-time rarely have the time necessary to participate in community activities such as volunteerism. Eliana, a 49-year-old with four children who emigrated from Mexico at age 15, supported this theme when she said, *“I was alone with my four children and...I had no time to do that [volunteer work] because I had to work to feed them.”* Paula, a 36-year-old mother of three who emigrated from Mexico at age 26, emphasized her investment in the US working culture: *“here the goal is to work, work and work.”* Paloma added, *“the problem is that in many cases people cannot do it [volunteer work]...because they have many jobs, and don’t have a lot of time.”* And Regina expressed the belief that those who volunteer do so because they do not need to support themselves financially, saying, *“I think most of the volunteers do not work full time.”* Certainly, taking advantage of job opportunities in the US is among the top priorities of these Latinas, which may mean working extensive hours and even seeking multiple jobs. As a result, they associate volunteer activities with those who do not have to work like they do.

## Discussion

Volunteer-led efforts are often the backbone of civic life in many US communities, especially in a time of shrinking service budgets and increased need. Volunteers often establish mutual relationships between themselves and those they serve—the volunteers offer their services and those receiving them offer the volunteers a sense of purpose and individual growth (Butcher 2003).

Narratives from this study on Latinas’ perceptions about volunteerism raise several discussion points. The first issue is that volunteerism, volunteer practices, and volunteers are construed differently in economically stressed, non-metro Latino communities in the US compared to the cultural context of urban areas. The second point of discussion concerns developing a more fitting notion of “informal volunteerism” that conveys the importance of “helping” as part of Latino culture. Finally, we discuss barriers that may prevent Latinos from participating in volunteer activity, including time-consuming activities of family and work life.

Results from the focus groups in this study indicate that the overall concept of volunteerism (as it is commonly used in popular US culture) seems unfamiliar and

unnatural to Latino community members, who often see themselves as the recipients, rather than the benefactors, of help. Hobbs (2000) supports this claim when noting that in many Latin American countries, volunteering is an activity performed solely by wealthy individuals to benefit the poor. The majority of Latino immigrants who come to the US are leaving contexts of economic stress, low education, and poverty. Many continue to struggle with those conditions upon arriving in their new home. Thus, many Latino immigrants to the US do not have much experience with organized volunteering (Hobbs 2000). Butcher (2010) has derived a helpful working definition of “volunteer” from Mexican participant interviews. He claims that in Mexico, a volunteer is understood as a person who, by his/her own choice, and without receiving any remuneration, contributes time to an activity that goes beyond the family sphere to provide service to others for the benefit of others and of society as a whole (Butcher 2010). In Mexico, “volunteers” of this sort are likely to be members of wealthy families who are engaged in “charity” work for the less fortunate (Serna 2007). A recent study by Wang et al. (2013) examined Hispanic formal volunteerism. Using results from two US national surveys and one regional survey, they conclude that Hispanics are less likely to engage in formal volunteerism than non-Hispanics. The study also found that Hispanics are more likely to (formally) volunteer through secular organizations serving children/youth and religious organizations. However, the status of Latino participation in informal volunteerism remains unclear.

Boyle and Sawyer (2010) focused on developing a better understanding of how African American men perceive volunteering. By exploring the extent to which race can affect volunteer activity, the authors found that African Americans are not less willing to volunteer, but simply less able to. Most importantly, this study reveals how one’s definition of volunteering can influence one’s perception of volunteer activities, since most participants felt as though they were actively volunteering, but that the activities in which they were participating did not always count as volunteering in the traditional sense (Boyle and Sawyer 2010). The fact that our findings on this matter corroborate those of Boyle and Sawyer supports our premise that correcting conceptual misconceptions about volunteerism is an especially important step for enabling communities with an expanding population of ethnic minorities to recognize opportunities for and participate in volunteer activities.

These perceptions Latinos and other minorities have about volunteering are not unfounded; there is in fact a significant discrepancy in social status and race/ethnicity between those who typically engage in organized volunteerism and those who do not. Successful volunteers also tend to have higher education levels, such as a college degree (Spitz and Mackinnon 1993; Wang et al. 2013). In one study, many respondents rated a teenager as a more genuine (i.e., voluntary) volunteer than a doctor; perhaps this is because volunteerism is more expected (i.e., pressured, involuntary) of those with high social status than those with low social status (Cnaan et al. 1996). Ramirez-Valles and Brown (2003) conducted a study on the volunteerism patterns of Latino men participating in HIV/AIDS-related organizations. They found that social class and ethnicity play a substantial role in determining who formally volunteers and who does not. Latino men may be less involved than their white counterparts because many of them come from working

class backgrounds and have statistically lower education levels. Some are also recent immigrants and either do not speak English or are less accustomed to US culture. As a result, they are often less comfortable volunteering for American organizations or feel as though they do not belong in volunteering contexts. Additionally, some Latinos participate in more informal types of community involvement (such as social networking) as opposed to formal volunteering (Ramirez-Valles and Brown 2003).

Past studies have also demonstrated that the concept of “volunteerism” is not necessarily transparent even among the wider American public. Brudney (1999) examined perceptions of volunteerism in the public sector and the contexts in which volunteer activity typically takes place, and concluded that there is little consensus as to what is or is not volunteerism. Hustinx et al. (2010) state that the term “volunteerism” is both general and complex, thus making it difficult for individuals to define. Cnaan et al. (1996) conducted a survey in order to determine how the average person defines volunteerism. They phrased the question as, “Who is a volunteer?” and presented several scenarios. For example, participants were given a profile of a fictitious person, such as “the hourly wage worker who, by his or her own choice, works extra hours without pay.” Subjects were then asked to say whether or not the person in question could be considered a volunteer. Researchers found that the higher the perceived cost to the individual in each scenario, the more likely he or she was considered to be a volunteer. For example, an adult who acts as a Big Brother or Big Sister for a young adult in the community was most often perceived as a volunteer. Conversely, a person charged with a crime who agrees to do community service in exchange for a lighter punishment was least often viewed as a volunteer. Based on these findings, researchers concluded that the cost to the individual was the biggest factor in determining whether someone is participating in an act of volunteerism (Cnaan et al. 1996).

When describing what a volunteer would look like, participants in this study seemed to hesitate initially, then draw on common understandings of volunteerism from their countries of origin and from popular US culture. They described a volunteer as someone “out of reach,” that is, of high social standing due to educational or economic status, perhaps excluding themselves from this role. These findings indicate that even among non-minority populations, it may be helpful to address potential conceptual discrepancies about “volunteerism” that might be affecting community members’ awareness of and willingness to participate in volunteer activities.

While the participants in this study were brief in their assessment of formal volunteering as the purview of those with higher socioeconomic prospects, they were quite articulate in discussing other matters related to helping fellow community members. Many of these helping activities may “fly under the radar” and could not be categorized as formal or organized, and thus may not be included when considering volunteerism within Latino communities (Carson 1999). Participants discussed activities performed “*de corazón*” (“from the heart”) or without payment as a familiar concept associated with informal volunteerism or with a “Latino way of volunteering.” Carson (1999) also notes the differences between formal volunteering (organization-based volunteerism) and informal volunteering



(aiding others on one's own when a need arises). The researcher concludes by saying that directly comparing these two types of volunteerism is unfair, since different cultural groups engage in and value different types of volunteer behaviors (Carson 1999). It is likely that there is a rich multiplicity of cultural understandings of volunteer/helping practices, varying on matters such as preferences for reciprocity and beliefs about altruism and freewill (Butcher 2003; Haski-Leventhal 2009).

While acknowledging variation in cultural definitions, a strong motivation for Latinos to engage in helping/volunteering associated with “*vuelta de mano*” (return or paying back) emerged for the focus groups in this study. Latinos want to pay back to the community as gratitude for the positive impact the community has had on their family or them as individuals. Clary et al. (1998) explain that one can measure an individual's motivation to volunteer by looking for distinct behaviors and attitudes, such as displaying one's humanitarian values, seeking understanding, gaining career benefits, protecting oneself from feelings of guilt about being more fortunate than others, increasing one's self-esteem, and finding a role within various social groups. Additionally, in a report by South et al. (2014) on lay involvement in public health programs and issues of payment, findings underscore altruism, commitment to community, and social rewards for benefactors as well as beneficiaries as motives for volunteerism, regardless of financial support.

Another motivator to volunteer in some quarters might be to learn new skills and refine old ones (Finkelstein et al. 2005). However, in this study, the Latina participants expressed that they would be more motivated to volunteer if opportunities allowed them to hone skills they had already acquired in their everyday lives. These participants felt that Latinos view “help” (or volunteering) as a way of cultivating activities they have experience with and know how to do, rather than as a chance to learn new things. Furthermore, because of the time constraints work and family duties impose on many Latinos, they are often less likely to associate volunteerism with leisure. Pi et al. (2014) found a correlation between serious leisure (the pursuit of a hobby or activity that one sees as fulfilling and/or potentially useful in the future) and motivation to volunteer, as well as between motivation to volunteer and subjective well-being. Stebbins (2012) defines volunteerism as a hybrid of unpaid work and activity that is leisurely and enjoyable, rather than only one or the other. The author seeks to challenge the idea, adopted by many in the past, that volunteer work is simply unpaid work, and does not have anything to do with leisure.

While motivations to engage are important to focus on, so too are barriers to volunteering. The Latinos in this study as well as others have cited lack of time due to family and work as major deterrents to engaging in volunteer activity. This is not surprising considering the large size of Latino families and the strong cultural norm of women caring for the family. Latinas have on average 2–3 children (Population Reference Bureau 2012) and they often reside in multi-generational households (Pew Research Center 2011). This domestic burden is compounded by values of ideal Latino family relationships characterized by close, warm, and supportive care networks that place family above the individual (concept of *familismo*; Campos et al. 2014). Maintaining such relationships can be both overwhelming and time-

consuming. Additionally, quickly acquiring work opportunities in the US is among the top priorities of Latino immigrants settling on new land. Low-wage jobs, however, require them to work extensive hours and even seek multiple jobs in order to meet regular household expenses or to pay off debts (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2000).

A further barrier to volunteering could be that many immigrants have very little familiarity with formal volunteer-based organizations (Hobbs 2000), either as recipients of volunteer help or as volunteer participants. Recalling the findings about the monochromatic and high socioeconomic status of most volunteers, there may be important structural barriers that diminish the chances of success for Latino-serving organizations. Ramakrishnan and Viramontes (2010) report on inequality in volunteerism at the organizational level, determining that Mexican (transnational) organizations are disadvantaged relative to mainstream ones. That is, they are lacking in resources, visibility, and influence over policy decisions. Ramirez-Valles and Brown (2003) note that racism towards Latino volunteers discourages them from volunteering or returning to volunteer positions they held in the past. Many volunteer organizations are run by white individuals who are not always welcoming to Latinos. In addition, Latino volunteers are often given positions based on their ethnicity that they may not enjoy. For example, a Latino man may be given the duty of translating documents from Spanish to English simply based on his ethnicity when another position may be more interesting or better suited for him (Ramirez-Valles and Brown 2003).

These barriers must be addressed if we are to have greater success in engaging Latinos in formal volunteering activities. Withers et al. (2013) conducted a case study on a global health medical mission in Mexico that encountered significant problems with recruitment and retention of native volunteers. As testament to the lack of family support they witnessed the Mexican community providing to volunteers, the authors claim that participants were “giving them trouble” in the volunteer activities because of “the mentality among Mexicans that if people don’t get paid, they don’t want to come” (Withers et al. 2013). Such attitudes are unlikely to help address the significant barriers that exist to more formal volunteering.

We conducted this study with Latina participants from non-metro Latino enclaves in Illinois, and thus, as is customary with localized studies, caution is warranted when generalizing our outcomes to the overall US Latino population. Also, this study’s use of the term “Latino” to identify its target population deserves further reflection. Although most understand “Latino” as categorizing those people who come from Latin America, or descend from Latin American ancestors, given the complexity of ethnic identity, Lindberg and colleagues argue that it is virtually impossible to talk about “Latinos” with any precision (Lindberg et al. 2013). Rodríguez (2013) published a commentary about the “Latino assumption”—the presumption that individuals of Latin American descent are a homogenous population—as an example of false universalism. The author links the origins of the Latino assumption to efforts by the US federal government in the early 1970s to collectively identify individuals of Latin American descent. Today, however, there is still a lack of agreement among US scholars regarding what term is most

appropriate. For instance, “Latino” and “Hispanic” are often used interchangeably, regardless of whether one is more accurate (or politically correct) than the other for labeling individuals who belong to this heterogeneous population (Umaña-Taylor and Updegraff 2013). Fernández-Morera (2010) point out that American universities use the term “Latino Studies” to designate programs of study developed by analogy with such programs as “African-American Studies”—a term that allows the incorporation of more customers to the program and opens the field to intersectional inquiries in other areas of study. Because of this study’s interest in exploring a specific demographic perspective on volunteerism, and considering the dearth of literature on “Latinos” in general or on specific subgroups, “Latino” served as a useful term that also supports inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

In conclusion, this study advances our understanding of the role that volunteerism plays in underrepresented minority communities and provides some insightful suggestions for future research into this important but understudied topic. Practitioners in communities seeking to engage more Latino volunteers should consider structural changes such that volunteering can be more like “helping,” and perhaps more flexible in time and context. It will also be important to draw clear connections between volunteer opportunities and culturally significant concepts such as “*vuelta de mano*” and activities performed “*de corazón*.” Volunteerism may fill a much-needed service gap in non-metro communities, and thus should be encouraged as way to promote community integration. More research is needed to better understand the influence of culture on volunteerism and to make sure that emerging groups (e.g., Latinos living in non-metro areas) are adequately represented in the volunteerism literature.

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Informed Consent** The Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign approved the study. A statement of informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

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