

Social Support Theoretical Perspective

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Overweight and obesity have been noted as major health problems among Hispanics, particularly Hispanic women.¹ Data indicates that approximately 39% of Hispanic women are overweight, with 47% having a body mass index (BMI) >27.¹ Mexican Americans exhibit the highest rate of obesity and the lowest rate of physical activity among Hispanic populations.²

Physical activity both prevents and helps to treat many established coronary heart disease (CHD) risk factors, including obesity and its associated risks.³ Healthy People objectives⁴ pertaining to adults include increasing the number of adults who participate in physical activity. Data from the National Health Interview Survey showed that Hispanics were 2.09 times more likely to report inadequate levels of physical activity compared with non-Hispanic whites.⁵ Given these data, there is growing concern over the substantial public health burden of sedentary lifestyle among Hispanic women.

Community-based interventions offer important opportunities to decrease premature morbidity, disability, and enhance the health status of underserved populations. However, the few community-based interventions designed to promote physical activity among Hispanic women have shown varying degrees of effectiveness.^{6,7} Further, culturally relevant, theory-driven interventions designed to foster support systems and supportive environments to promote physical activity are few. The combination of health risks for disease, disability, and mortality, particularly among underserved populations, might be best addressed through programs designed to enhance awareness and develop resources within a context of community support. Integrative, theory-driven designs for community-based interventions have

been recommended, including interventions that foster social network support.

The purpose of this article is to describe a theory-driven approach to developing a culturally relevant social support intervention to promote physical activity among Hispanic women. A social support framework guided the development of *Mujeres en Accion por Su Salud* [Women in Action for Their Health], grounded in formative research, partnership with community members, and strengths of community-based physical activity interventions with Hispanic women. *Mujeres en Accion por Su Salud* focuses on the mechanisms that link social supports to physical activity, fostering naturally occurring social networks, role models, and community resources. Intervention development was based on program theory as advanced by Lipsey:⁸ problem definition, critical inputs, mediating processes, expected outcomes, and implementation issues. A summary of the critical elements of program theory underlying *Mujeres en Accion por Su Salud* appears in Table 1.

Problem Definition

For many women, lifestyle changes such as increased physical activity occur in a context of friends, family members, and social contextual settings that contribute to the behavior-change process.⁹ Integration in a social network has been shown to provide a sense of purpose, recognition of self-worth, ability to meet expectations, motivation for self-care, and identification and use of resources.^{9,10} Social support systems are consistent with both cultural factors and social norms linked to health behavior change.¹¹ Social support has been shown to be especially relevant, and perhaps a more potent factor in health promotion among Hispanic women compared with women of other ethnic groups, with greater social support being associated with higher levels of physical activity.^{9,12-14} *Mujeres en Accion por Su Salud* focuses on providing supportive resources designed to promote the

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Table 1. Elements of Program Theory Underlying <i>Mujeres en Accion</i>					
Problem	Critical Inputs	Mediating Processes	Expected Outcomes	Exogenous Factors	Implementation Issues
Limited supportive resources Physical inactivity	Emotional support Instrument support Appraisal support Information support	Perceived support Perceived environment Neighborhood resources	Increased physical activity CV health BMI Body composition Fat distribute	Participant characteristic Cultural consideration Setting safety Availability of resources	Material resources Community setting Safe walking area <i>Promotora</i> resources

BMI = body mass index; CVD = cardiovascular.

adoption and maintenance of regular physical activity within a culturally relevant community context.

Critical Inputs

Existing research indicates that Hispanic women may be more responsive to programs that specifically provide needed support and role models for physical activity. The mobilization of naturally occurring social networks through intervention is important because such networks are indigenous to the community and offer culturally relevant and effective social support. To meet its goal of promoting the adoption and maintenance of physical activity among Hispanic women, *Mujeres en Accion* incorporates key dimensions of social support. Social support is defined as aid and assistance exchanged through social relationships and interpersonal transactions and includes 4 distinct types of support: 1) emotional support, including expressions of empathy, trust, caring; 2) instrumental support, including tangible aid or service; 3) appraisal support, including information that is used for self-evaluation; and 4) informational support, including advice, suggestions, and information.¹⁵ *Mujeres en Accion* critical inputs target planned changes in the structure of supportive mechanisms, operationalized through supportive interaction between group members and community-based *Promotoras*, changes in interactions between women themselves, and group engagement and role modeling of self-paced, moderate-intensity walking as the behavioral change of interest.

A useful approach for health promotion through social support is the use of peer counselors or lay health educators, also known as *promotoras*. A *promotora* is a member of the community to whom other community members turn for care, advice, information, and support or to overcome barriers inherent in health-promoting behavior, such as physical activity. As a social network strategy, interventions including *promotoras* are guided by the assumption that an individual's behavior is influenced by the social groups to which they belong and from which they derive their "social identity."¹⁶ *Mujeres en Accion* includes Hispanic women community members as *promotoras*, which extends understanding of culturally relevant and supportive

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