

# JÓVENES SIN FRONTERAS: LATINO YOUTH TAKE ACTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE & WELL-BEING

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## **Introduction**

Latino adolescents in the U.S. endure health and social inequities such that they are less likely to complete high school and less likely to have access to health care than their non-Latino white counterparts.<sup>1</sup> These disparities can compromise chances for health and social advancement over the life course. Additionally, many youth experience social marginalization and discrimination and find their communities at risk due to rapid social-demographic changes in urban neighborhoods that are currently being re-developed for higher income and more socially advantaged white residents.<sup>2</sup> Chicago has a large and growing Latino population representing the two largest groups in the U.S.: Mexican and Puerto Ricans, with the balance having heritage in or migrating from the Caribbean, and Central and South America.<sup>3,4</sup>

One Chicago community in particular is known for its unique social and political organization, and for having a nearly even distribution of Mexican and Puerto Rican residents: The Humboldt Park community. This community area was originally settled by whites of eastern European descent, including Poles and Germans. However by the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Puerto Rican and Mexican residents became more prevalent, many forced out of their original settlement areas due to changes in ethnic composition and rising real estate prices in the more desirable neighborhoods such as Lincoln Park on Lake Michigan.<sup>5</sup> Many of the white residents moved out of Humboldt Park and other Chicago central city communities around the time of urban uprisings and social distress of the 1960s, seeking opportunities in the expanding and largely white and more affluent suburbs. Puerto Rican and Latino residents formed tightly knit subcommunities, albeit in increasingly isolated and blighted areas,<sup>6</sup> in response to forces of structural racism. Fullilove<sup>7</sup> describes these dense support networks as “emotional ecosystems”. This phenomenon is a protective factor providing social support and in our opinion, the possibilities for a sense of coherence<sup>8</sup> in the face of adversity among residents of marginalized minority communities. Today many of these same communities are highly desired and contested space, with realtors and developers and investors speculating on white “gentrification”, a process where more advantaged groups cause the original inhabitants of a neighborhood to move out due to rising rent and mortgage rates. Humboldt Park has organized to combat this displacement and discrimination<sup>6,9</sup> and indigenous Latino leadership has realized the value of developing and young leadership to ensure the future of the community. It is within this context that The Puerto Rican Cultural Center facilitated and sponsored the creation of a space for area Puerto Rican and Latino youth in March of 2002. With area college students the

Cafe Teatro Batey Urbano or “The Batey”, was founded as a grassroots space dedicated to the Puerto Rican/ Latino youth of Humboldt Park in particular and of Chicago. <sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to present a participatory evaluation using an empowerment framework to demonstrate how the Batey fosters (1) Latino Unity and positive youth development among participants; (2) youth led action and organizational empowerment, (3) positive community connectedness and community-building and (4) broader societal connectedness and social justice. The theme for this paper “Jóvenes Sin Fronteras”, speaks to the common historical forces, current situational dilemmas, and collective strengths that transcend specific racial/ethnic heritage in this community of Latino youth. Youth are encouraged to explore and connect with their ancestral homelands and cultures (e.g. Mexico, Puerto Rico), while appreciating the greater and yet diverse Latino experience in the U.S. <sup>11</sup> As an empowering community setting, the Batey Urbano serves as a model of youth social action and creativity for positive social change and social responsibility.

## **Background and Significance**

In this section, a brief review of the critical issues impacting the health and well-being of Latino youth as well as supporting theory for the methods and approach taken by this project are presented.

### Well-being of Latino Youth

Latino adolescents represent a growing population of youth. Between 2000 and 2020, the Hispanic adolescent population ages 10-19 is expected to increase by 50%, comprising 22.5% of the adolescent population in 2020. <sup>12,13</sup> While most US adolescents are generally regarded to be in good health; <sup>14</sup> Latino youth experience increased health risks in that they are more likely to have attempted suicide, to have unprotected sexual intercourse, to have a lifetime prevalence of substance use (e.g. heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and ecstasy) and to be overweight. <sup>15</sup> Moreover they are least likely than either their white or African American counterparts to have health insurance and there and they face more cultural barriers to health education resources. <sup>1</sup> In spite of these inequities and challenges that need to be addressed, Latino youth possess strong cultural assets with strong family and community connectedness. Most youth are not engaged in negative health behaviors except perhaps for concerns around nutrition and physical activity, leading to an obesity epidemic among minority youth. <sup>14</sup> An emerging paradigm of positive youth development (PYD) <sup>16</sup> and Youth Thriving <sup>17</sup> recognizes that healthy development and a healthy transition to adulthood requires more than just the

absence of disease and health risk behaviors. Youth assets that need to be fostered include protective factors such as a sense of purpose, sense of belonging and a sense of future possibilities; positive connections to peers and extrafamilial adult support as well as connectedness to school and community. Many of these assets need to be cultivated in the social environment where youth spend increasing amounts of time- in school and in community settings.<sup>18</sup> Features of PYD will be elaborated upon below.

### Community Context and Adolescent Well-Being

Community connectedness is related to the perspective of developmental contextualism,<sup>19</sup> emphasizing the role of community programs and institutions as resources for positive youth development. Youth involvement in these settings provides opportunities for skill development.<sup>20</sup>, the emergence of civic activism,<sup>21</sup> sense of community<sup>22</sup>, and access to pro-social adults who serve informal mentoring functions.<sup>23</sup> Such connections foster what Lerner and colleagues<sup>24</sup> describe as the 5 Cs of positive youth development (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring). Similarly, in a review of literature on substance use, Catalano and Hawkins posit that social bonding in the community (connectedness) is part of a social development model in which youth can bond with more than one social/ ecological unit and derive benefits for positive behavioral norms based on social learning theory.<sup>25</sup>

### Empowering Community Settings

Empowerment has been described both in terms of empowerment processes as well as empowerment outcomes.<sup>26</sup> Zimmerman describes empowerment processes as “those where people create or are given opportunities to control their own destiny and influence the decisions that affect their lives” and empowerment outcomes as specific measurements of the impacts and outcomes of empowerment processes.<sup>26</sup> Empowerment allows participants engaging in that process to develop an awareness of their social, political, economic, and historical contexts in society; assess how these contexts impact their individual and collective experiences; and take action to create social and physical environments that encourage positive individual and community change.<sup>27</sup>

Zimmerman<sup>26</sup> presents a model of individual, psychological empowerment (PE) consisting of three components, (1) intrapersonal (including domain-specific perceived control, domain-specific self-efficacy, motivational control, and perceived competence), (2) interactional (including critical awareness, understanding causal agents, developing skills, skill transfer across domains, and resource mobilization), and (3) behavioral (including community

involvement, organizational participation, and coping behaviors). Peterson and Zimmerman (2004) propose a model of organizational empowerment (OE) that also includes three components, (1) intraorganizational (including incentive management, subgroup linkages, opportunity role structure, leadership, social support, and a group-based belief system), (2) interorganizational (including accessing the social networks of other organizations and participating in alliance-building with other organizations), and (3) extraorganizational (including implementing community action and disseminating information). Organizations can be both empowering and empowered. Empowering organizations are those that effectively facilitate psychological empowerment, while empowered organizations have an impact on the larger system of which they are part, including community, politics, economy, and society. These models are useful for exploring the individual and organizational characteristics that contribute to the process of empowerment.

#### Participatory Action Research with Youth

The growing call for academic researchers to include community members in the research process in meaningful ways<sup>28</sup> is not limited to adult members. The specific relevance for youth is described by Earls and Carlson. In their words, “Over the past few decades, social science in the United States has struggled to acquire a strong academic presence at the risk of becoming elitist and isolated from how lives are actually lived.”<sup>29</sup> Our concern rests with the reality that children and youth are systematically and nearly universally excluded from the planning, design and execution of such research”.<sup>30</sup> They and others<sup>31</sup> suggest that the inclusion of youth can bring the research in closer touch with the lived reality that it is trying to understand, and that doing so should result not only in better science, improved interventions and policies, but in positive developmental outcomes for participating youth. In this regard, the literature on youth civic engagement and community participation, just emerging in public health and participatory research, is relevant here.

#### **Methods**

This project used a case study design to provide an in-depth examination of particular phenomena, in this case a youth organization. A case study design allows for an in-depth understanding of the multilevel process of empowerment within one organization and offers information for the development of empowerment theory and models.<sup>29</sup> By examining the process of empowerment within one organization, details about this process can be carefully observed, and implication for theory and future hypothesis testing with quantitative studies can

be developed. A case study also allows for observation of the processes of empowerment in a real-life setting. This allows individual-, organizational-, and community-specific characteristics of empowerment as well as their interactions to be examined. Qualitative methods were employed for data capture and included participant observation,<sup>32</sup> eight semi-structured interviews<sup>33</sup> as well as a group debriefing,<sup>34</sup> and review of program materials<sup>35</sup> - all over a two year period from 2006-2008. The first five interviews were conducted by the second author under direction of the first author in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Master of Public Health degree at the Degree at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The last three interviews were conducted by the first authors, with the participation of the other two co-authors in transcribing and data analysis and interpretation of findings. All of the co-authors contributed to the writing of the final manuscript.

The interview guide was developed utilizing the concepts of individual, organizational, and community empowerment processes and their interaction as well as the local relevance of the term “empowerment”. The interview guide is available from the first author. All research activities and the interview guide were approved by the UIC Institutional Review Board for protection of human subjects from research risks.

The interviews were digitally recorded, and transcribed. Next, a code dictionary of common themes and ideas presented in the interviews was developed. Then, the interviews were coded using the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti,<sup>36</sup> and the resulting data was analyzed to assess common themes and ideas as well as relationships between these themes and ideas. Next, field notes and artifacts (posters, flyers, media materials) were also analysed for thematic content using the same coding scheme. Identifying these relationships allowed for evaluation of specific individual, organizational, and community empowerment processes as well as more locally-relevant context and language.

A participatory action research (PAR) model<sup>37</sup> was used such that before the project began, it was discussed with the executive director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the youth organizer for the Batey Urbano. A group debriefing was also held to achieve informant feedback or “member checking”<sup>34</sup> as a method to enhance the ecological validity of the study. In accordance with the PAR approach, a draft of the final manuscript was also reviewed by community participants prior to submission for publication.

## **Selected Results**

### General Impressions from Participant Observation and Review of Materials

A content analysis of Batey field notes from participant observation as well as other organizational materials revealed that the Batey is consistent with its mission of providing area youth with constructive alternatives using technology and creative arts for expression, identity development and civic engagement. Civic engagement is achieved through a well known participatory democracy project where youth organize themselves and participate with community leaders in events and activities that foster community building and change. Examples include weekly door-knocking in specific areas to outreach to local residents, acquaint residents with local issues impacting the community, connect them with resources and gain resident feedback on issues affecting their lives. Youth participate in writing columns for La Voz, a monthly community newspaper that is also a project of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. La Voz is distributed at local businesses and given to residents during the door-knocking outreach events. During the period of observation youth were involved in events that encompassed creative writing and “poetry with a purpose”, meaning that youth expression was designed to capture and critique the social realities that community youth experience, as opposed to the commercial media portrayals of youth that sensationalizes violence and presents youth as predators and social problems with no social responsibility. The ethos of the Batey is “vivir y ayudar a vivir” or “live and help to live”. This is a deliberate collective ethos that distinguishes itself from the American “live and let live” rooted in white protestant individualism.

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The Batey members produce posters and media in support of community initiatives ranging from HIV/AIDS awareness, immigrant rights to anti-gentrification. Specific examples of how Batey activities related to the major themes of this paper will be represented under the topic areas introduced in this paper and presented below.

In terms of the youth interviewed, they ranged in ages from 18-26. All youth were attending college either full or part time and all were involved in mentoring younger community youth who attended the Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican high school.

### Latino Unity & Positive Youth Development

What separates the Café Teatro Batey Urbano from other youth-focused organizations appears to lay in the organization’s ability to enhance the emergence of healthy identity. As one youth says:



“Unlike many other organizations that say ‘we got to get them off the streets,’ the Batey is a place where people can affirm themselves, where people can affirm their identities, where people can become human again because the process of dehumanization and colonization in our lives is a reality.”

Another youth commented on the collective consciousness raising and reinforcement of a positive social identity that the Batey fostered:

“Liberation of seeing other young people like them – Puerto Ricans and Latinos – be able to articulate ideas, be able to put together concepts – that may be things that they know, but don’t know that words exist for those things, like gentrification, or people putting up condos, or yuppies moving in. And that it’s just not your average analysis of what that’s about and what you can do.”

#### Youth Led Action and Organizational Empowerment

The Batey website <sup>39</sup> states collective policies developed and agreed upon by members:

“The use of any intoxicants and/or drugs is prohibited. The use of any expressions that degrade human beings are not permitted (No sexist, racist, homophobic expression or acts).”

A participant noted that involvement was facilitated by the youth-led structure of the Batey Urbano. This structure allows for youth ownership of activities by letting youth take responsibility for completing the activities:

“That’s what gets the people – because you own it. You see people’s language change about the Batey a few weeks in. They go in and they’re really shy, but when they are given the opportunity or when they take the opportunity to sweep, to fix a flyer, to call for a confirmation of an act or something, people start taking ownership of that.”

Additionally, a participant notes that the organization engages youth because it allows youth a space for open expression and creativity:

“Batey is there for you. You define your role. You define your space. You define how you express yourself. You define it. You bring yourself to that. You bring whatever you can bring – your experience, your collective memory to that space. And it’s yours to do that. That’s what gets people hooked initially, and that’s what keeps people involved.”

## Positive Community Connectedness and Community-Building

Two projects of the PRCC and Batey Urbano in particular are geared to foster whole community change: The Humboldt Park Participatory Democracy project and the monthly newspaper, La Voz.

The Batey website reveals the purpose of the PD project:

“With a holistic approach, PD seeks to encourage active participation in community building as strategy to stabilize and preserve longstanding homes and organizations. Our practice has shown that ownership over one’s home, block, and community can only be fostered through consistent, deliberate, and culturally relevant engagements. PD aims to facilitate the involvement and leadership of an ever increasingly number of residents in shaping the community’s vision. Through education, relationship building, and community engagement, the Humboldt Park Participatory Democracy Project hopes to counter displacement by establishing and nourishing spaces of creative connections for the residents of this community.”

Likewise, the monthly newspaper, with many Batey contributors projects youth a chance to disseminate information to the broader community citing local cultural events, Puerto Rican and Latin American history and historical figures, and practical information residents can use such as how to avoid predatory lending and apply for classes on small business ownership. The website and La Voz itself note the following about this creative community newspaper. Its purpose is framed as “Informing and Advocating

for the Preservation of our "Pedacito de Patria" in Chicago.” It goes on to state:

“La Voz de Paseo Boricua is a grassroots newsletter of the Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center. We work in collaboration with Various Community organizations to stabilize and strengthen the Puerto Rican community in Humboldt Park. During this historic moment, our objective is to provide our community with regular and reliable news and updates on community programs.”

Perhaps one of the most remarkable legacies of the Batey so far is the creation of the Barrio Arts and Culture Community Academy (BACCA), founded in 2006 and funded with local foundation monies in 2008. This after school community program offers high school youth a safe supportive and simulating environment to develop skills in technology and the arts. Then youth can apply them to help their community accomplish a goal such as the community building functions of the participatory democracy project, and the local paper,

LaVoz. Instead of just learning skills, youth critically appraise their social realities, while actively learning to be contributing members of the community, as in the Batey approach to community work. Many of the young adults who contribute to the BACCA were at one time Batey participants, and the experience of the Batey served as a model for the BACCA.

### Impacting Broader Societal Connectedness and Change for Social Justice

Batey members fostered Latino Unity through demonstrating that Puerto Ricans and Mexican youth can join forces and march for Immigrant Rights. Chicago has had significant support for the 2007 and 2008 May Marches with heavy youth involvement. The Batey was listed on the Chicago May Day Coalition website<sup>40</sup> along with Congressman Luis Gutierrez and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley.

In other demonstrations of solidarity with the Latino Diaspora, the Batey and PRCC actively supported the sanctuary movement involving the Mexican activist Elvira Arellano<sup>41</sup> the year she has avoided deportation by living inside a Humboldt Park church, literally 2 blocks down the street from the Batey. The youth also supported the movement to release the Puerto Rican political prisoners, still held in US penitentiaries because of their beliefs and actions in support of Puerto Rican independence. A play entitled *Crime Against Humanity* that reveals narratives of life as a political prisoner in the U.S. was developed by Batey leadership and members participated as actors and production staff.

Empowerment literature discussed ways in which organizations can mobilize members to collective action on behalf of a common goal. When asked about a local youth perspective on empowerment, one youth leader who had been with the Batey since its inception reflected on the value of lived experience as a source of power:

“The objective I think is to ultimately provide an ethical alternative to the dominant ...social arrangement that cannot be based on power, its not about Puerto Ricans having power... think implies power over something, the difference between authority and power ...and when I think of authority I think of like when we say someone is an authority on global warming or something like that we may listen to that person whether or not when we listen to that person based on their practice, their research, their involvement with something right, um, and I think if we look at people that way right we are all sort of authorities on different things and um someone if I talk to -someone who has lived here their whole life in Humboldt Park, they’re an authority on Humboldt Park.

It's someone that we should listen to -someone we should take their advice and their counsel seriously.”

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This abbreviated analysis of selected domains of youth organizational and community impact illustrates the role of empowerment, and the transnational identities of Latino youth co-existing in a multiethnic community. From the data presented, we can see that the Batey facilitates empowerment at multiple levels from the impact on individual members, to the development of a youth collective and onto the community and greater society. Maton<sup>42</sup> presents organizational characteristics of empowering setting: group based belief systems, core activities, a relational environment, opportunity role structure, leadership, and setting maintenance and change. Space limits precluded mapping data to each of these categories, but they are implied in the representative results just presented.

Yet youth critiqued the academic notion of empowerment, even as their narratives of personal and community transformation often seem to align with concepts in the literature. Because empowerment is a complex concept intertwined with deeply embedded social, political, and economic power structures, potential limitations of the concept should be considered. From a feminist perspective, Riger<sup>43</sup> writes that empowerment is problematic because it implies the transmission of power to an individual or group that “lacks” power. If this power is externally transmitted, that assumes power is being transmitted from a more powerful individual with control over the quantity and timing of the transmission; therefore, the process of empowerment relies on the very power structure it is trying to subvert. If the power is internally drawn in, that assumes a marginalized individual has the information, resources, and skills to gain power; however, the process of marginalization often denies access to these tools of empowerment. Therefore, Riger criticizes “a preference for masculine concepts of mastery, power, and control over traditionally feminine concerns of communion and cooperation”.<sup>43</sup> She challenges us to redefine power, and advocates the conceptualization of empowerment in a more collective and less individualistic sense. It is this latter notion that is relevant here, even as youth spoke about how Batey membership changed them, they related these changes only in the context of collective support and action. Finally, because empowerment is a multilevel process that can occur within individual, organizational, and community contexts, understanding the processes at these various levels as well as the interactions between levels will assist public health

professionals, community leaders, and community organizations with utilizing methods that will most effectively encourage the empowerment process.

In terms of youth identity development and well-being, the Batey fostered ethnic pride and a sense of coherence <sup>8</sup> about the broader socio-historical-political context of events affecting the Chicago Latino community. A well known poem about Afro-Caribbean heritage and pride circulates on U Tube. While not presented in the results, Batey youth have numerous opportunities to meet and work with numerous Latino activities, artists and scholars, often taking bus trips to attend events in other Diasporas communities in the States, and in the summer of 2007, in Puerto Rico, where a relationship with a coffee collective was developed. Youth are conformable with cross cultural relations and academic visitors and scholars are greeted warmly when they visit the community. According to Phinney <sup>44</sup> ethnic identity achievement involves an exploration of the meaning of ones ethnicity and a “secure sense of oneself”. As adolescence is a critical time for ethnic identity achievement; attitudes toward other groups are formed during this time by experiences with these outside groups. These positive connections can in turn expand the available social and cultural capital that any one youth has access to, and these social resources can connect youth with opportunities outside of their primary social groups.<sup>45</sup> In terms of inter-group relations among Latinos, DeGenova <sup>11</sup> writes about a broader “Latinidad” occurring, as Latinos interact and form social bonds with different subgroups, or access common cultural resources such as newspapers or media.

In conclusion, the Batey Urbano facilitates empowerment based on shared social responsibility and Paulo Freire’s <sup>46,47</sup> notion of critical consciousness. A reciprocal process of action and reflection in a participatory youth collective fosters positive youth development, and builds an empowering community setting with impact and social connections than span community, ethnic and national boundaries.

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