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## **A SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO IMPROVING HEALTH-RELATED QUALITY OF LIFE FOR MIGRANT WORKERS\***

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### ABSTRACT

This ten-week pilot study promoted health-related quality of life among migrant workers in rural New Mexico. In cooperation with local organizations, migrant workers formed the organization *Nuevos Amigos*. Members provided various types of social support to each other, hours were enumerated and exchanged for cash to pay health-related quality-of-life expenses. The program was funded by grant funds from HRSA and administered in cooperation with a clinic and a nearby university. Intake and other interviews, observations of members in action, and spending practices provided data to evaluate the program. The pilot program showed that migrant workers could manage their own organization, that the model provided tangible benefits, and that the club became a vehicle for developing supportive relationships with initially anonymous nonclub members. Despite the short term of the pilot program, a six-month follow-up indicated families were still benefitting from prosocial relationships. The program's few problems and many benefits demand further experimentation with this model.

Near the U.S.-Mexico border, the city of Anthony links Texas and New Mexico. The communities in this area are small, rural, largely agricultural and mostly Mexican-American with many immigrants, most from Mexico. New immigrants work in vegetable packing plants, and families contribute to the migrant worker population that makes possible much of the agricultural industry in the U.S. The wages they earn are low and seasonal, and they receive no health benefits, leading to healthcare concerns among other social problems. Compounding these health problems are environmental hazards related to working conditions. The agricultural industry in which they work is noted for some of the most hazardous working conditions in the country. Environmental problems associated with agricultural occupations are many, including unsafe housing, lack of drinkable water and pesticide exposure. Findings point to a link between pesticide exposure and birth defects such as limb-reductions as well as lymphomas, leukemia, and cancer in adults (Rust 1990). In short, migrant workers experience a poor quality of life

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\*The author gratefully acknowledges Sylvia Sapien, Executive Director of the *Promotora* Program in Anthony, New Mexico, and her staff without whom this pilot project could not have been tested. Doris Slesinger provided useful comments on a previous draft; this paper is dedicated to her memory. Robert McMaster, Wilfred Dolfsma, and the Special Issue editors made important suggestions. I am also grateful to Manuela Romero, Cruz Morales, Elise Gold, Kevin Konieczko, Thy Vo, Tyler Marcus, Kyle Rolenick, and Eric Reinert for editorial and research assistance.

SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 93

and have diminished economic prospects for themselves and their families. Their marginal place in the political-economy erodes their self-esteem and impedes their contributions to community life and their integration into civil society.

In response to these problems, a partnership was developed between the author, then employed at the University of Texas at El Paso, and the *Promotora* (health promoter) Program in Anthony, New Mexico, and its parent organization, *La Clinica de la Familia*, the Family Clinic, in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The *Promotora* Program is the social service agency of *La Clinica*; as such, it is an organization charged with promoting health in the several hundred square miles in and around Anthony, New Mexico, itself about 25 miles from the home office of *La Clinica*. The program is staffed by *promotoras*, local women usually without college degrees, who are trained to provide frontline social services to migrant workers and the community at large. Together we designed and implemented a pilot program to improve migrant workers' health-related quality of life.

In the ten-week pilot program, we found that immigrant migrant workers could effectively establish and manage their own civic organization and their relationships with other organizations—in this case the *promotoras* and the University. We also demonstrated that this organization could implement a program that served to improve access to health care and health-related quality of life (Slesinger and Ofstead 1993, 1996). The organization implemented a social currency program in which members exchanged services with each other and earned “points” toward cash for health-related expenses. The details are explained further below. However, the program is based on the idea that migrant workers (or any persons for that matter) are productive people whose capacities are undervalued and that the unpaid work they do in support of each other should be valued and rewarded. The currency created rewards the unpaid work members do for each other and so becomes a tool that develops and fosters relationships between members by valuing the help they provide each other. In this regard, the currency fosters the growth of social capital between members. Social capital is an abstract concept that emphasizes the value of social networks, generalized reciprocity, and trust among individuals (Putnam 2000). Social currency, on the other hand, is the *design element* that materializes the latent or unrecognized resources present in a population to foster social relationships and improve the quality of life for members of that population.

Besides the immediate benefits to members, the new organization also had an unexpected, positive impact on the larger community that was not anticipated at the creation or implementation of the program. A six-month follow-up indicated the relationships created and strengthened through the program persisted beyond the

life of the organization and that members were better able to navigate other organizations on their own behalf. In other words, besides improving the health-related quality of their lives, the pilot program also affected the social structure, produced private and public goods and enhanced migrant workers' capabilities.

This article demonstrates these findings in three sections. The first section sketches the socioeconomic, health, and organizational context by describing migrant workers as people with potential despite their many problems. The second section describes how migrant workers' capabilities were developed by way of the social currency designed and implemented with flexible and supportive organizations. The third section describes the results, specifically positive unintended consequences, of the ten-week pilot program.

### PEOPLE AS POTENTIAL, NOT JUST PROBLEMS

Even the most marginalized people have capabilities that can be recognized, developed, and shared with one another (Cahn 2000; Oughton and Wheelock 2003). This is the premise of "capability" ethics, asset-based community development, and recent work in human service provision (some of Lisbeth Schorr's work is described below). This approach is rooted in its focus on what individuals can do or be, rather than on what resources they possess or how satisfied they are with their lives. What people can do or be, however, is dependent on organizational support and the socio-legal context (Jackson 2005). In this section, the article documents the problematic social context migrant workers face but also illustrates their potential as productive members of society.

#### *Migrant Workers' Social Problems*

Migrant workers are often considered among the most marginalized groups in society (Rothenberg 1998), especially with respect to political and organizational processes. Migrant workers have little experience with formal organizations; mostly they are clients and have little understanding of bureaucratic processes. Nor do all street-level bureaucrats foster knowledge of those processes or empower their clients (Lipsky 1980). Furthermore, they are often victims of capricious growers who deprive them of wages and good working conditions. Some are undocumented, a condition that makes them hesitant to participate in public life and seek public services. Indeed, migrant workers have little leverage with political processes and little experience with the wide variety of empowering civic organizations that exist in the United States. Civic participation can empower individuals and groups, but

SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 95

instead of enjoying enhanced prospects from participation in society, migrant workers are often the pawns of organizations that need “clients” to represent. Migrant workers often live in poverty, and, not surprisingly, they also suffer from a myriad of health problems and a generally poor quality of life. They endure the highest levels of workplace injury and death. To make matters worse, their working conditions and pay are among the poorest in the nation. Farmwork is among the most hazardous occupations, and minorities and Mexican immigrants are disproportionately represented in these dangerous jobs (U.S. Department of Labor 2000). Physicians treating farmworkers generally compare workers’ health with that of residents of developing countries (Rothenberg 1998; Rust 1990). Farmworkers suffer from chronic infections, advanced untreated diseases, and numerous problems resulting from limited access to medical care.

Economic and social problems plague migrant workers in other ways. For instance, many families cannot afford transportation. They have to spend time hitchhiking or money paying for rides to work, to shop, or to get to other activities. Poverty limits their ability to improve their housing and often forces tradeoffs between paying utility bills and purchasing food. They often live in sparsely populated areas, which limits the relationships they can develop with other migrants or with sedentary residents. Occasional but irregular migration limits the time they can spend developing relationships, so they are often without a network of social support. In short, migrant workers are caught in a web of interrelated problems—unfamiliar with or marginalized by organizations, they have poor health, economic problems, inadequate transportation, and few sources of social support. In short, migrant workers experience a poor quality of life with little hope of improvement.

Migrant workers are marginalized in almost every dimension—social, economic, and political—and in terms of health-related quality of life. Churches and social service organizations are their most consistent point of supportive contact. However, as indicated above, street-level bureaucrats are not consistently supportive of marginalized social groups (Lipsky 1980), although organizations can be designed to help empower the marginalized (Schorr 1998). The next section describes the organizational context in which this pilot program was tested.

*Organizational Context: Perceptions and Potential*

For more than 30 years, *La Clinica de la Familia* (LCDF) in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, has provided health care to southeastern New Mexico. Since the early 1990s an agency of LCDF, the *Promotora* Program, has worked with migrant

workers and others who face social, political, economic, and health hardships daily (for a description of health promoters, see Eng and Young 1992). The *Promotora* Program seeks to ameliorate health and other social problems but also hopes to empower clients and enable them to engage more fully in social and political life. Social service organizations such as this one are important vehicles for promoting the public good and in particular each person's capabilities (Jackson 2005). Furthermore, recent research indicates the efficacy of seeking to improve individual capabilities (Jackson 2005; Oughton and Wheelock 2003). But when an organization is limited by self-interest; local, state, and federal regulations; and/or other exigencies, then the organization is distracted from its social service mission to focus on concerns with self-survival or enhancing smooth functioning (Lipsky 1980; Schorr 1998). However, Schorr (1998) identifies the characteristics of social service organizations able to "tame" these distractions and provide services that are both efficient and effective. She notes that when organizations have strong leadership and good management and training, then employees are better able to understand and balance the tradeoff between adhering to rules and providing equitable and high-quality services. A work culture emerges based on these shared values that can foster adherence to the organizational mission and more effectively achieve the goals of that mission. Finally, Schorr suggests that effective organizations draw on outside intermediaries to leverage their limited resources and increase their reach. In short, she indicates that when organizations successfully "tame" their bureaucracy, then life changes for the clients become possible.

#### *Organizational Behavior in the Promotora Program*

Schorr's (1998) work describes and exemplifies organizational characteristics that are favorable for promoting healthy relationships between client and organization. The *Promotora* program director, Sylvia Sapien, describes how her team has "tamed" the program's bureaucracy and the spirit that infuses the vigorously trained 19-member staff of mostly female high-school graduates:

Our program functions on the needs of the clients, not our agendas, and sometimes people walk in with different needs and things just happen. You cancel things for needs of the community. If there is an accident or disaster, we are there to pitch in. I don't like structured organizations, and as a program director, I get to "non-structure" our programs. You see, in most programs, people have to follow all of these guidelines; "you have to meet this, and have to be this, and you can't get services if you have this," and

SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 97

because of the flexibility and training of my staff, they've learned how to find the path in the state and federal regulations to secure what the clients need. The results are obvious. Of all the LCDF (*La Clinica de Familia*) offices, we are number one in staff retention and we have the biggest staff; yet we do the most training, but that is so the *promotoras* can understand and do the work they need to do.

This flexibility of organization and this spirit of service cultivate healthy relationships, help meet organizational goals, and foster a willingness to experiment. The organization prides itself in discovering the novel solution. New *promotoras* are strengthened in this spirit through continuing education. This professionalism is reflected in how they organize their workday.

*Promotoras'* cars, for instance, are rolling offices whose back seats and/or trunks always have boxes of files from which their work might be done in a random meeting at a parking lot of a church or in the front yard of a home. Sapien describes the importance of training and a flexible *promotora's* work schedule:

It's in the job description they have to attend training because they are *promotoras*, and they haven't attended college, so we teach them everything they need to know. What they have to have is the desire and the heart to work with the community. The rest is constant training. We have at least two to three in-services from other agencies every month. But I know everyone is busy. They have families as well, but as long as the work gets done, I don't care when it gets done. So if somebody has to leave early because they have a doctor's appointment or they have to run their grandmother up to the grocery store, they can do that. As long as the bottom line, the work that is, gets done, they can make phone calls from their home and finish the work on Saturday morning. That's what they love about working here and that's what I mean by organized non-structure.

We can see how the *promotora* is responsive to her clients, but also how her work is responsive to her personal life. This careful attention to both helps this organization build legitimacy and success through well-trained employees who are treated and behave as professionals despite the absence of significant credentials. The spirit of service suffuses and builds trust within the organization and between the employees and their community. Ultimately, this spirit of service, in turn, produces trust in the various state and federal agencies and other organizations that

support and fund the effective and efficient work of the *promotoras*. Despite the problems migrant workers face, they have strong allies in the *Promotora* organization. But the *Promotora* organization, committed as it is to addressing social ills, still has its habits and organizational practices. The *promotoras* had to be convinced the pilot social currency program was worth trying.

### *SOCIAL CURRENCY, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION*

Social currency was described to the *promotoras* as a *design tool* to develop and reward relationships between individuals, between individuals and organizations, and between organizations and the larger community. Social currencies have existed for decades, have been developed for different purposes, and have gone by various names (Time Dollars, Ithaca Bucks, etc.—see Boyle 2000). Each currency is a measure of exchange, wherein one unit of the currency is equal to some amount of labor time or another unit of value. Each currency is implemented with its own accounting system, and participants agree to accept the currency for exchange. However, unlike cash money that can alienate participants in an exchange, social currencies are intended to draw people together and reinforce community (Boyle 2000). The following design principle characterizes all social currencies: their use should promote healthy relationships, self-reliance, and solidarity. This design principle is open-ended and adaptable to any particular objective. Thus, since it is applicable to many different contexts, social currencies can serve the purposes of different populations.

#### *Social Currency and Social Capital*

Social currency might be confused with social capital, and a brief discussion should clarify the distinction. Commonly we think of social capital as a label for characteristics that enable people to do things they are otherwise unable to do. Putnam (2000) understood social capital as a quality of civic engagement, networks, norms, and trust that enable effective action in pursuit of shared objectives. However, Putnam did not identify how to improve social capital, nor did he elaborate on how to design social systems to enhance social capital. Ambiguity related to the term has caused some researchers to see social capital as an almost worthless term (see, for instance, Baron and Hannan 1994; Smith and Kulynych 2002), but for others (Robison, Schmid, and Siles 2002) the idea directs us toward actionable, reconstructable, and designable elements of social organization. Yet,



SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 99

without specific design elements, social capital is simply another idea, one we can do without.

By contrast, social currency is a design element of a social system intended to weave elements of social capital, trust and reciprocity, with elements of social organization, individuals, families and organizations. When created the currency acts like money facilitating transactions within the group. The group decides how to use, value, and account for the currency. Social capital is a label for latent features, real or presumed, in some existing social situation or organization. Social currency fosters interaction, and serves as a measure of interaction or exchange. For the migrant workers, the currency was designed to value the unpaid work of keeping house, caring for children, and other unpaid social support. Yet beyond recognition, the migrant workers who earned this social currency converted it to dollars that they could use to pay for health-related expenses.

At conception, designers of a social currency begin with some idea for their currency; perhaps it is to reward the unrewarded, build healthy relationships, increase trust, enhance skills, something else, or some combination of goals. The social currency replaces arms-length transactions with intimate relationships to facilitate the goals of its designers and participants. Hence, social currency is self-consciously intended to replace the typical exchange logic of *caveat emptor* with the community-oriented notion of *e pluribus unum*. Social currency creates incentives for interdependence among people and relocates "market forces" to a subordinate role in organizing and producing one's quality of life. The following description of the currency design and implementation will help other organizations to test and replicate this program in other contexts.

*Design and Implementation*

The author received a small sub-grant of a larger grant to Texas Tech University intended to support migrant worker health. He canvassed the environment, unsuccessfully at first, for a flexible organization with which to partner in experimenting with this program. After two false starts, he encountered the *Promotora* Program and, over a series of meetings, presented the plan and reached a partnership between his university and the *Promotora* Program of the LCDF. Without these flexible organizations working together, the program would never have been tested. The general plan was to develop a social currency to improve migrant workers' health-related quality of life. From there, the *promotoras* began to execute the plan by recruiting migrant worker families.

Six *promotoras* presented the program, each to one migrant worker family. The families were previously unknown to each other, causing more potential difficulty for the program, but providing a rigorous test for the idea. The families were invited to a dinner meeting where they were again presented the idea and asked if they would form a new organization that would help improve their health-related quality of life. Initially, the families were not enthusiastic, which made sense given that these migrant worker families were not familiar with each other nor did they have experience running their own organization. Still, after assurances of how the program worked and the various benefits they might receive, they consented to initiate the organization, which they named “*Nuevos Amigos*,” or new friends.

#### THE KICK-OFF MEETING, ORGANIZATION, AND PROGRAM ORIENTATION

Forty people attended the initial dinner meeting, including six *promotoras* who recruited the initial families to the program. The *promotoras* organized the dinner and grant funds paid for the food. The first half of the dinner was devoted to introducing the families, enjoying dinner, watching the children break a *piñata*, and listening to two *promotoras* describe the program. They described the program in these words:

The idea is for families to help each other in ways that they might have when they lived in a small community. In small communities, people provide rides to stores or doctors, provide child care, and help with home improvement or vehicle repair. Each hour a person, older than seven, spends doing supportive activities, becomes an hour their family uses to earn one of the four levels of membership in the club: bronze, silver, gold and diamond. The level of membership will be redeemable for cash benefits on a bi-weekly basis.

Since *promotoras* had briefed families about what they could expect, the post-meal discussion was brief. *Nuevos Amigos* was born. One migrant worker volunteered to lead the next meeting, another volunteered to coordinate the next meal for those who attended, and a *piñata* would be purchased for the next dinner to celebrate any birthdays or anniversaries occurring in the two-week period.

In the second half of the meeting, we learned about each family and its health-related needs. We discovered the families needed money to pay for healthier food and also to pay for health-related home necessities, such as fixing broken windows,

SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 101

paying rent, and paying utility bills for heating and cooking gas and other utilities during the winter. We also discovered that their health-related debts were not great due to care that most received from LCDF clinics, but we also found out that their dental care was inadequate. Unfortunately, the limited time-frame of the pilot program did not permit us to explore how to improve their dental care.

Still, to achieve the goals of the grant, funds would be used first to pay bills related to healthcare debt and health-related expenses. Thus, we flexibly interpreted the grant to mean that after direct health-related expenses were paid, other health-related bills connected to quality of life could also be paid, including bills for utilities or home improvements. Checks to utility companies or store gift cards would be the means of dispersing money for bills, groceries, or the supplies the migrant families needed to improve or repair their homes.

The structure for the currency was similar but inverse to belonging to a country club. In a country club, dues are paid periodically and membership advantages accrue by attaining higher levels of membership. Members of *Nuevos Amigos* paid dues in the form of hours supporting each other, and besides the social support they received from each other, their work was further rewarded as health-related bills were paid or cash vouchers were earned from the grant. The accounting period was biweekly: every two weeks the organization would meet, its members would share a meal, and benefits would be counted. We explained that this additional monetary benefit was available from a special grant and would not be a permanent feature of the organization.

We determined the money each family would earn by multiplying the average monthly food and utility expenses, \$500 each month, by a multiplier for level of membership (see Table 1). Each membership level is associated with the number of hours family members work for their own and other families during any given biweekly period. So, for instance, if members of a family achieve gold membership in one period, then they can convert those hours by multiplying \$500 (the average expenses) by 0.4 (the credit multiplier) to receive \$200 toward health-related expenses during that period.

In the concluding hour of this first four-hour meeting, participants enthusiastically developed relationships, discovered things they could do to support each other, and planned to start working together. Forming *Nuevos Amigos* helped them address their own immediate financial problems but would also make a difference in their relationships with each other. They swiftly developed trust between each other for three reasons. First, the *promotoras*, whom they already trusted, were proxies for trust between families. Second, they saw themselves as in

Table 1. CLUB LEVEL BY HOURS AND CREDIT.

LEVEL	HOURS PER BI-WEEKLY PERIOD	CREDIT FOR MULTIPLIER FOR HEALTH AND QUALITY OF LIFE RELATED EXPENSES
Bronze. ....	0-6	10%
Silver.....	7-15	20%
Gold. ....	16-29	40%
Diamond. ....	30+	60%

the same situation, with similar problems and needs; this rough equivalency promoted interpersonal trust. Third, they readily understood the program as a social opportunity with economic benefits. While they were happy with the new relationships, the money they earned was of tremendous benefit. The migrant workers called this money, “a lightning bolt of good fortune, we have to take it!” Thus, the initial trust provided by the *promotora*’s legitimacy was built by the frequency of subsequent supportive contact and meetings.

Participants adopted the rules that the *promotoras* and I developed. Later the members demonstrated a growing comfort with their organization. This familiarity with organizational behavior increased trust in each other and eventually produced the ability to adapt the rules appropriate to their experiences, problems, hopes, and needs. What were once isolated families became a new organization. Figure 1 illustrates how the organization was founded, the elements of this reconstructed social structure, and the subsequent process by which it operated.

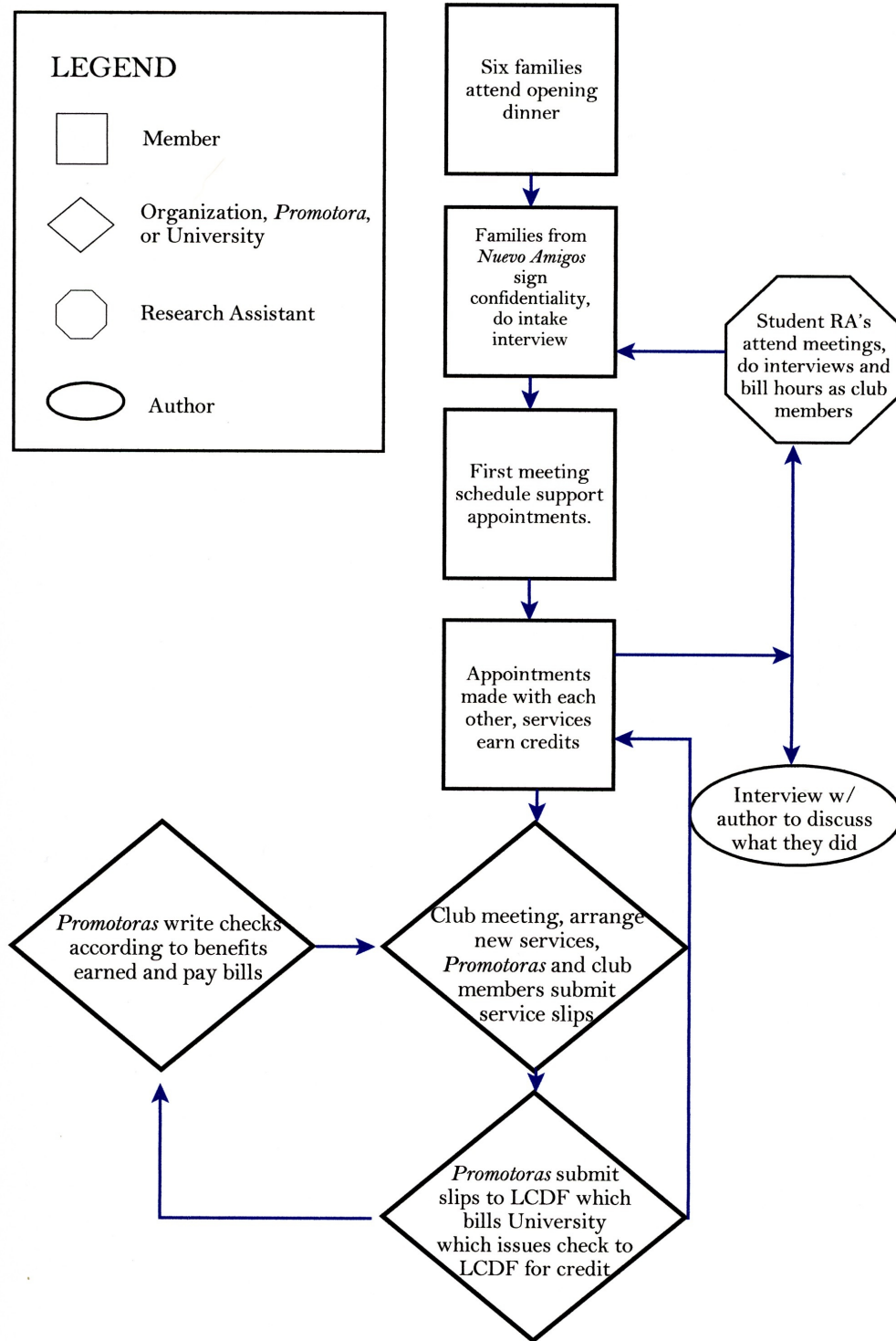
The members selected a representative, one of the mothers of a family, to become their administrative assistant at the *Promotora* organization. Supervised by a *promotora*, and supervising three teenage daughters of *Nuevos Amigos*, she accounted for the hours the families exchanged and she facilitated interaction between the research team and the families.

#### BENEFITS FROM SELFLESSNESS

For ten weeks in the summer of 2002, *Nuevos Amigos* with its organizational partners the *Promotora* Program, LCDF, and the local university practiced and developed the social currency program described above. The program gave birth to one immediate collective good—the improvement of health-related quality of life; however, the participants also realized other collective benefits from participation,

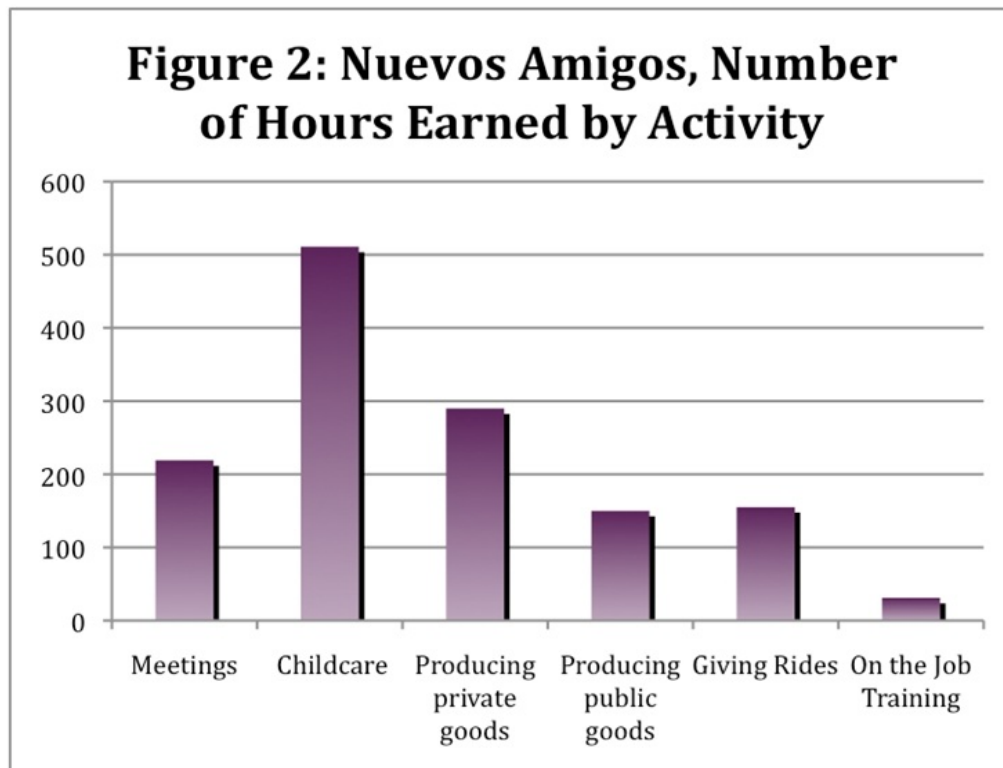
SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 103

Figure 1. ORGANIZATION DESIGN AND EXECUTING THE SOCIAL CURRENCY PROGRAM.



including social support, self-efficacy, and improvements in their overall quality of life.

Figure 2 describes the number of hours members worked to support each other over these ten weeks, taking into account all hours spent doing club-related activities.



We can see that over ten weeks childcare consumed the vast majority of work hours—about 500. About 300 hours were used in “producing private goods,” which is the general category for any health-related improvement project. Auto and home repair were typical of the “private” goods produced; this category included activities such as clearing yards of used tires and other hazardous debris, replacing broken windows, laying tile floors, repairing vehicles, and many other domestic jobs. Since only half the families had working cars, almost 200 hours were used in the fifth category—“giving rides.” Hours in the fourth category, “producing public goods,” were mostly earned over one weekend in an extraordinary use of the organization that will be described below. Attending meetings was rewarded and valued for the work of maintaining relationships and fostering individual abilities; this also included undergoing training from other social service agencies in health-related

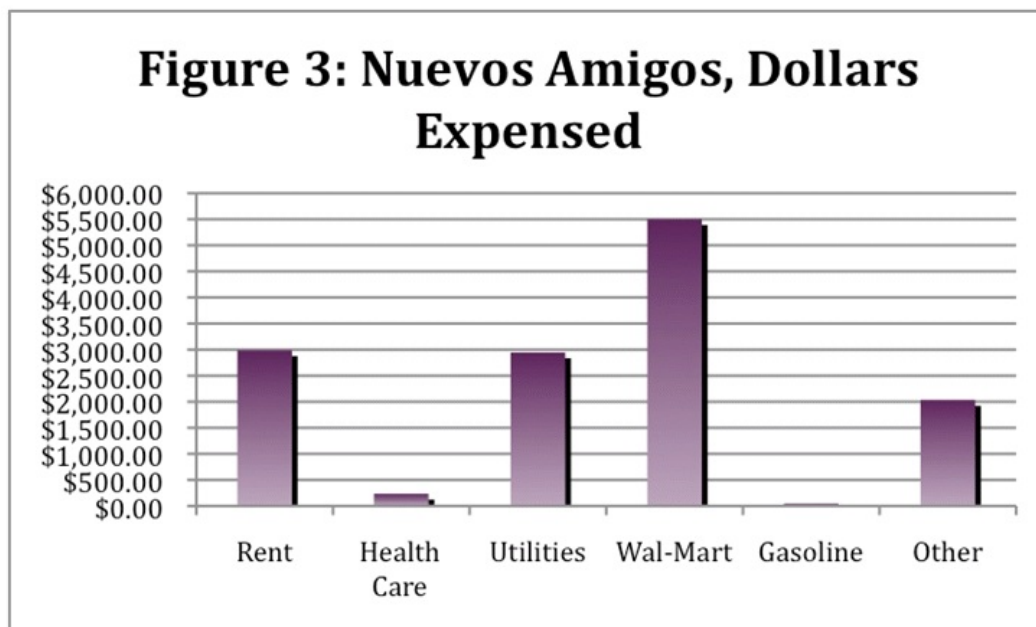
SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 105

matters. Each meeting of *Nuevos Amigos* was facilitated by a different adult from one of the families and all families contributed to the shared meal. The smallest category, on-the-job training with *promotoras*, was work three high school-aged women did with the *promotoras* as an initial experience in the world of nonfarm employment. Those involved described the experience enthusiastically, which were not reflected in the number of hours worked.

The *promotoras* also participated in the program and the six worked 71 hours on the project over the ten weeks. This work was mostly monitoring the families they recruited, checking in, or filling in as stopgap transportation. Still, *promotoras* also helped members secure utilities for the winter of 2002-2003 by working with families and utilities to have larger propane tanks installed and the cooking/heating gas paid for. The hours they worked were above their normal workday, and they earned benefits in the same way, as did members of *Nuevos Amigos*. The one migrant worker who administered the program worked 193 hours, or about 20 hours per week. She facilitated connections among the families, collected and processed the vouchers exchanged when some service was rendered, helped the members arrange meeting times, coordinated the biweekly meal, processed utility bills and other documents circulating among the *Promotora* Program, LCDF, and the university, and did other clerical work. This was excellent on-the-job training for her and the young women she supervised.

Figure 3 describes how members utilized their monetary benefits. They earned \$13,727.03 over the ten weeks of the program, most of which was spent on health-related needs to improve quality of life, including supplies for auto/home repair, clothing, food, and utilities. Other categories of this type included rent. The benefits ensured two families remained in their homes when their lack of work drastically reduced their income.

During the ten-week program about 40 percent (\$5,501.90) of the earned money purchased Wal-Mart gift cards which families used to buy food, clothing, school supplies, fuel for automobiles, etc. Money used for rent and utilities was about equal, at \$2,986.97 and \$2,945.32, respectively. *Promotoras* helped three families secure larger propane tanks and assisted every family in paying its gas bills, in advance, for winter. About 15 percent (\$2,033.14) of earned benefits was spent in the “other” category on materials for home improvement, the repair of broken windows and doors, holes in interior walls, faucets, etc. The small amount of health-related debts was paid with the first checks available to families.



The *promotoras* used benefits for the same purposes as did the members, paying mostly utility bills and taking up small home improvement projects. The migrant worker employed to administer the program earned most of the income in this category, 72 percent (\$2135.00), and she spent her earnings mostly on home-related needs. Indirect expenses, like paper, files, meals, and other organizational meeting costs were paid by grant funds.

In summary, the organization and *promotoras* earned all of the grant money that was set aside for their direct benefit, which totaled more than \$16,000. Member families and *promotoras* invested in their homes if they owned homes and in short- and middle-range needs.

#### A COMMUNITY BENEFITS FROM PEOPLE DOING THINGS TOGETHER

Thus far the story is one of organizations helping families band together to create an organization whose purpose was to enhance their health and well-being by supporting pro-social behavior. The support of the university and the expertise provided by the *promotoras* enhanced the project. Migrant workers on their own informally exchange favors, but not at the scale achieved by organizing *Nuevos Amigos*. The social currency helped achieve the scale by formalizing the exchange process and the grant money further provided incentives for the pro-social behavior. The grant lubricated the new relationships and made meetings and other interactions more consequential by imbuing them with additional meaning and



SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 107

importance while also stimulating a learning environment. Implementing the social currency developed trust, reciprocity, and effective collective action, all hallmarks of social capital.

However, besides fulfilling immediate goals of the grant, *Nuevos Amigos* realized several important benefits to individuals and two significant benefits to the community. Individual benefits included enhancing individual capacities and producing “public” goods. This pilot program transformed the social structure, at least temporarily. Collective goods are benefits that accrue to a particular group of people. Here the collective good was measured by the number of hours spent doing things for other club members; the private good was the direct benefit of the service provided and the money each family earned from participating in the club. The program also produced individual goods, meaning the capabilities of particular persons were developed from club membership.

Members of the club enhanced their individual capacities. Children took advantage of job-training opportunities with the *promotoras* and developed a sense of their nonfarm employment opportunities. They began to connect skills sets developed in school to needs of businesses in the community; furthermore, they found the connection between high school and college more concrete and inquired about life at the university. Adults developed leadership skills by organizing each meeting of the club, developing an agenda, and producing a dinner and day care for each meeting. Each adult who convened a meeting volunteered to do so, but since each had no experience at doing so, each meeting was an adventure. After each meeting, its convener would discuss with us how difficult getting up in front of people and managing a meeting was. What was more difficult to each was the work preparing for and executing each meeting. These insights did not serve to deter club members. In fact, it was with gusto that a volunteer emerged at the end of each meeting to serve the next. The most diffuse but perhaps most important individual capacity enhanced was a sense of belongingness to each other—a spirit of friendship that pervaded club members for at least six months after the pilot program.

Besides individual entitlements, public goods were also produced. The creation of *Nuevos Amigos* changed the social structure, at least temporarily, by planting a new civic organization in this small agricultural community. After less than six weeks, *Nuevos Amigos* found itself represented, sought after, and contributing to the larger life of the community, just as other formal organizations might be sought out. In short, the organization contributed to public spirit and produced collective benefits to its members.

This larger public role and the public goods produced can be demonstrated briefly by two examples. First, the club was approached by a state health agency to host a meeting of migrant workers to learn about pesticide protection. The club could not be contacted directly but was approached by way of the *promotoras* who took advantage of the more intimate connection club members had to others in the migrant worker population. The successful meeting that resulted demonstrates the legitimacy the organization had with respect to the *promotoras* and the legitimacy organization members had with respect to their fellow migrant workers. The organization conveyed information and provided indigenous representation of migrant worker interests to state-level policy makers.

The other example of this larger public role is more striking for demonstrating the members' increased social-organizational skills and the organization's impact on the community. This example begins with a non-*Nuevos Amigos* adult approaching a member requesting to address the organization at a meeting. The nonmember was invited to a meeting, and at that meeting, the nonmember described her family's serious problem: her home had burned to the ground. She had purchased a used mobile home, but needed help clearing the lot for delivery of the new residence. A silence followed this announcement and plea for help. The convener of the meeting turned to me to ask what to do, and I said, "it's your club; ask for some discussion." A few moments of silence were followed by increasingly confident discussion. The discussion produced an important tension between the desire to help the family in need and whether or not to count that help as part of the hours club members earned. Again, some silent thought ensued, a silence that ended when a club member suggested a novel solution. "Let's change the rules to make work for nonclub people count as hours worked for club members." This solution was very important as it demonstrated the member's ability to use the organization for broader ends. The migrant workers, instead of being used by organizations, were developing a new sense of themselves and of how organizations erect boundaries, yet they realized that those boundaries were under their control. Again, I was turned to on this question, and with thrill and pride, I replied, "It's your club." We had witnessed the exercise of new capacities, a new sense of self with respect to environment, and a new efficacy with respect to formal organizations.

The convener found no other discussion of the subject and tentatively asked club members to vote on whether or not to help this family and whether or not to change the rules. Some confusion ensued until the measures were disentangled, but once presented appropriately, both measures passed resoundingly. We felt a palpable happiness in the woman who would be helped, but even more so among the

SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 109

membership. We had just witnessed a change in the social structure with direct implications for the club. This happiness sprang from three things. First, members became agents of change, as they adopted the organization for other goals and were happy they could help other people in their community. Second, members understood how the organization was theirs to do with it what they wanted. Third, members realized their new status as a group, an organization that was part of the community and capable of greater goods. In brief, they recognized that they themselves along with their activities were similar to other civic organizations like the Rotary Club. This vignette illustrates the concrete benefits produced and the spirit of possibility that took root. This spirit is necessary to contemplate, initiate, and manage the organized efforts required to produce public goods.

In summary, in the short ten-week period of the pilot program the club *Nuevos Amigos* provided health-related benefits, enhanced individual capabilities, and developed a profile in the community by assisting community members not related to the organization.

#### CONCLUSION

In Anthony, New Mexico, migrant workers improved their health-related circumstances by co-creating a new organization that used a social currency program to produce a variety of benefits to individuals and their community. The success of the program contradicts notions of some scholars or policy makers who believe that migrant workers are shackled by their poverty and poor life chances and who believe that migrant workers are inflexible and incapable of affecting their own life chances. This work opposes those who believe that migrant workers are insufficiently educated or experienced to control and manage formal organizations and that social service organizations are too inflexible or afraid to implement programs that foster their client's independence.

The organizational partnership created the migrant worker club *Nuevos Amigos*. That organization modeled an effective service provision strategy by blurring the lines between "clients" and "service providers." More fundamentally, by valuing the unpaid work of the most marginalized among us, that organization enhanced the dignity of these people and the people they touched. Migrant workers managed their club, maintained records of supportive activities done with each other, and eventually modified club rules to have a broader social impact. Members and *promotoras* realized a tight reciprocal relationship between the social capital produced and the social currency earned. Migrant workers' self-esteem increased as their self-efficacy increased. They began to see themselves in new relationships

with each other and the organizational environment. The network ties they formed and trust they developed extended beyond the club and past the grant. The grant funds they earned enabled the improvement of their health-related quality of life.

The grant funds also increased the *Promotora* organization's effectiveness. Instead of solely working for clients, the *promotoras* helped transform members of this marginalized population into a peer organization. *Nuevos Amigos* enabled members to assist each other and increase the reach of the local social service organizations by modifying the club rules and activities to support nonmember families. The experience illustrates the adage, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, however, and he will eat for a lifetime." By working *with* migrant workers, not just "for" them, *promotoras* promoted the truth of this adage as migrant workers discovered tangible value in the work of maintaining their households and practicing supportive relationships with other migrant worker families.

By creating and using this pilot program, migrant workers and *promotoras* enhanced capabilities and transformed social structure. In other words, they produced private, collective, and public goods. The organization established and modified rules people used to organize and measure their work with each other. They imposed no expectations on members' behavior; members could work as much as they desired on the activities they deemed useful to each other. Members formed kin-like relationships that were generally stable and fungible as well as amenable to new needs and opportunities to serve each other. Members continued to relate to each other for many months following the pilot program.

Members of *Nuevos Amigos* realized that the rules were made for them, to enable them, not to constrain them. The rules provided a framework for relationships, but the rules could be and were modified as needed. The rules replaced shared biographical experience when the variety of nonkin households established the organization. The social currency acted to lubricate, or "unstick," relationships and foster ambitions. The organization worked because the *Promotora* program demonstrated flexibility and fostered migrant workers' belief in themselves and each other.

This pilot program demonstrated an alternative model for social service provision. Externally provided funds make experimentation possible, but even so social currency programs thrive in several places around the United States and Europe. Given a reallocation of resources, such programs could easily grow and become a permanent fixture in the sociopolitical life of a community. The key to program success is people committed to "putting people first" (Cahn 2000),

SOCIAL CURRENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY OF LIFE 111

encouraging the organization of activities to emphasize the co-production of human capacities and relocating “market forces” to a subordinate role in organizing and producing our quality of life.

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