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Accompaniment in a Mexican immigrant community: Conceptualization and identification of biopsychosocial outcomes

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ABSTRACT
Taller de Jose (TDJ) offers accompaniment in a Mexican neighborhood in Chicago, helping service participants navigate health, judicial, and social service systems. Using a community-based participatory approach, the current study conceptualizes the accompaniment service and identifies psychosocial outcomes. Focus groups with service participants and staff were conducted, using a grounded theory approach. The data provides support for a conceptual model of accompaniment based on interdisciplinary knowledge in ministry, social work, and public health; and a consideration of social context, values, and outcomes such as increased social support, knowledge of community resources, and improved self-efficacy.

KEYWORDS
accompaniment; Mexican immigrants; social services; community-based research

It is well documented that Latinxs access formal and informal services and social support confined within their immediate community due to experiences with discrimination or disrespect when interacting with mainstream social and health services (Ayón, 2014; Boerstler & de Figueiredo, 2003; Magaña & Ybarra, 2010). In addition, the literature describes barriers to accessing services for the Latinx community due to language, immigration status, lack of access to transportation, and a lack of familiarity with U.S. cultural norms and expectations (Barrio et al., 2008; Engstrom & Min, 2004; McElmurry, Park, & Buseh, 2003). Taller de Jose (TDJ) was founded in order to serve the predominantly Mexican community of Little Village by addressing these barriers and assisting residents in accessing multiple social services through the process of accompaniment. In the TDJ context, accompaniment is more than pastoral ministry, case management, or patient navigation. TDJ uses an interdisciplinary approach grounded in pastoral ministry combined with the disciplinary knowledge base of social work and public health. Using this approach, the TDJ staff provide a comprehensive and holistic assessment meeting client needs in a variety...
of domains such as health, legal, education, and social service by assisting individuals in gaining access and navigating those institutions, and offering the opportunity to feel heard and supported in this process. As such, their mission is to offer “... companionship and personal attention to people who have difficulty finding their way in a complex social system” (Taller de Jose, n.d., par. 1.) This mission is fostered by challenging social structures to be more inclusive and just, seek system change, and create consciousness about the inherent worth in each person.

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to help TDJ conceptualize and operationally define the direct service of accompaniment and (b) understand the service participants’ perceived benefits of accompaniment services. TDJ is a unique agency in that it is the only agency in the Chicago area to provide informational, physical, and emotional accompaniment as a social service. This can include sitting with a service participant and hearing them in the office, accompanying them to court, or helping them to access a service. Understanding what is meant by accompaniment services, as provided by TDJ, can assist in efforts to provide better training for compañeras, the individuals providing the accompaniment service, and can inform efforts to replicate this model in other agencies. Finally, by identifying the perceived benefits of accompaniment services, it will be possible to better measure outcomes in future program evaluation efforts. The following sections will describe the social service needs of Latinxs, the role of faith in serving immigrant communities, and how accompaniment has been described in the literature.

The social service needs of Latinxs

As Latinxs become a larger proportion of the U.S. population, social service and health care providers must address issues of disparities, needs, and provision of services while being culturally responsive and appropriate. Latinxs are the largest minority population in the United States and the fastest growing segment of the population (Ayón, 2014; Diller, 2004; Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). Despite their growing numbers, they are considered the new underclass due to their disproportionate rates of poverty and undocumented immigration status (Massey & Pren, 2012). These high rates of poverty combined with an anti-immigrant climate place Latinxs at higher risk for experiencing social and psychological stress such as hunger, homelessness, and mental distress (Ayón, 2016; Dohan, 2003; Dreby, 2015). While Latinxs experience social conditions such as poverty and discrimination that place them at high risk of mental health difficulties and other health and social problems, they experience limited access to services (Bledsoe, 2008). TDJ is an agency that intends to fill this gap in service by connecting individuals to services or being present with them while navigating these
systems. In addition, TDJ aims to create more responsive and inclusive systems as they interface with these institutions.

TDJ, sponsored by the sisters of St. Joseph, opened its doors in 2008 and opened a second site in 2010. The Sisters of St. Joseph describe a vision based on love and inclusivity, providing a value-based foundation for accompaniment services that guides the relationship between the service participant and the compañera. While accompaniment has a long history among people of faith and their work with marginalized communities, it is a fairly new concept within the world of social services. TDJ has formalized accompaniment as a social service and uses an interdisciplinary approach for provision of services. Accompaniment in this context is defined as a relationship between the service participant and the compañera grounded in values of dignity, unity, mutuality, love, and respect that uses interdisciplinary knowledge to navigate mainstream institutions, build capacity, and create more accessible and responsive systems.

**Faith and accompaniment as a progressive force**

Individuals working from a religious faith perspective have become a progressive force in pursuing immigrant rights in an era that is largely anti-immigrant and nationalistic. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008), people of faith are working within a context of tension about the role of religion in public policy, and are, therefore, strategic about when and how to use religious tools. This tension arises from the U.S. context where people of Christian faith have served as a force for repression and exclusion as seen through the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Right, referring to those who use the scripture to justify the regulation of marriage and a constriction of gay rights, abortion, and curriculum in the schools. The Christian right has had an important role in politics since the 1980s, and were instrumental in the election of George W. Bush (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008). In contrast, others from the faith community use nonfundamentalist forms of religion to work toward inclusivity and social justice. In the context of a hostile reception toward immigrants, it has been faith-based activists of all religious backgrounds who are and have been working to protect the human rights and dignity of immigrants. A focus on religion and faith is particularly necessary in the United States as it is considered the most religious postindustrial nation with deeply religious immigrant groups (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008). Contemporary views of religion and migration provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of the role that faith communities play in leading the way toward inclusion of immigrant groups, understanding the transnational existence of families, and in promoting resilience among immigrant groups.
Among these contributions by people of faith are those who have dedicated themselves to accompany the poor by advocating for civil, economic, and human rights of immigrants as well as contributing to efforts to end poverty, hunger, and racism. Accompaniment is grounded in theology of liberation, a theological discourse that focuses on structural conditions that maintain people in poverty and has been adopted by multiple subgroups facing oppression and exclusion, such as Latinx *mujeristas*, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities and so on (Griffin & Weiss Block, 2013). There is growing body of theological literature that describes accompaniment as a form of pastoral care grounded in Latinx and liberation theology (Nanko-Fernández, 2010). As Nanko-Fernández (2010) describes, accompaniment is “necessarily contextual, as it entails attending to particular individuals and communities, in particular times and circumstances, with particular needs, gifts, challenges, and limitations” (p. 81). This contextual nature of accompaniment is especially relevant for TDJ as they are providing accompaniment services within a particular community, political, and social context. Thus, the form that accompaniment takes necessarily responds to the unique aspects of the community they serve. In the Little Village context, this means attending to the needs of a primarily undocumented, Spanish-speaking population with multiple barriers to accessing services, and with particular needs related to the legal system and immigration.

Within the Latin American context, accompaniment is described as a process of “restoring hope” (Sacipa, Vidales, Galindo, & Tovar, 2007; Weingarten, 2010), “bearing witness” or psychosocial accompaniment when defending human rights in Latin America (Navarro García, Pérez-Sales, & Fernández-Liria, 2010). For example, protective accompaniment is provided for family members in Guatemala of those who disappeared by the state’s military operations during the 36-year civil war while filing police reports or identifying bodies in clandestine graves that have been uncovered. It is from the experiences in Latin America that we understand the core principles of accompaniment:

- nonintrusive collaboration,
- mutual trust and respect,
- common analysis of what the problem is,
- commitment to solidarity,
- equality in relationship,
- explicit focus on process, and
- the importance of language (Finn, 2016, pp. 289–290).

These aforementioned principles fit well with the profession of social work and existing professional ethics and values. Kroeker (1996) states that within the social service context, accompaniment enhances the possibility of
empowerment compared to traditional social services that tend to impede empowerment due to subtle condescension and distance from the people they intend to serve. Within the U.S. context, there have been no empirical studies within public health, social work, and religious ministry that focus on accompaniment as a social service. The limited studies that briefly discuss accompaniment do not provide further conceptualization or discuss how it is defined (e.g., Barrio et al., 2008; Weingarten, 2010). Thus, while the practice of accompaniment has a long history among faith traditions, accompaniment is new among social service providers and has the potential to inform practice with marginalized populations.

The unique combination of social work, public health, and ministry at TDJ connects accompaniment directly to the provision of social support. Levels of social support can be mediating variables in the promotion of physical and mental health for low-income, immigrant Latinxs (Alegria, Scribney, & Mulvaney-Day, 2007). It is also theorized that Latinxs also tend to utilize natural support systems instead of formal helping relationships in social service agencies (Ayón & Naddy, 2013). However, this can be a problem when members of the same social support network are experiencing the same problem or are overburdened with their own needs. TDJ plays a critical role in the provision of social support for a community that is often taxed due to the preponderance of similar needs or isolation due to the immigration status.

The compañeras at TDJ provide practical assistance beginning with a thorough assessment. Services can include physical accompaniment as participants navigate institutions such as the legal system, education, or healthcare. From the perspective of an outsider not familiar with the roots of accompaniment in pastoral care, all that is often visible is the physical accompaniment or translation assistance similar to the role of a patient navigator in public health or a caseworker in the social services. However, what was expressed among compañeras and service participants is that much more was happening in this relationship between service participant and the compañera such as emotional, spiritual, and social support, empathy, and the preservation of dignity. This more is not always visible and, thus, needed to be better defined and articulated.

Methods

This project was grounded in elements of Community Participatory Based Research (CBPR). When the initial contact was made in 2010, TDJ was developing a volunteer program and needed an in-depth exploration of how their approach worked so that they could develop additional training for future volunteers. In addition, they had been approached by other organizations wanting to replicate their service model. This research project
evolved into a study to conceptualize accompaniment and understand outcomes. Elements of this project that are consistent with a CBPR approach include attention to barriers to participation, researcher commitment, a shared development of the research question, and mutual benefit from the research (Minkler, 2004). Through a collaborative process, we developed the following research questions:

1. How is accompaniment defined and conceptualized by compañeras?
2. What do the compañeras believe are the essential components of training?
3. How is accompaniment at TDJ similar or different to other forms of accompaniment described in the literature?
4. What are the perceived benefits for service participants of TDJ?

**Data sources**

There were three sources of qualitative data collected; staff focus groups, service participant focus groups, and ethnographic data. This study conducted six service-participant focus groups in 2011, and two sets of staff focus groups in 2011 and 2014. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 min in length and included a facilitator and notetaker. In addition, participant focus groups included a brief demographic survey.

**Ethnographic data**

Ethnographic data was collected over the 4-year period. These experiences included researcher participation in meetings at the agency, shadowing compañeras during accompaniments, and a 6-month experience as a part of the Little Village Team participating in the Illinois Faith and Public Health Leadership Institute.

**Staff focus groups**

Three focus groups were conducted in 2011–2012 with the TDJ staff to gather data about the work they do, how they understand accompaniment, and what they think a new volunteer or staff member would need to know in order to provide accompaniment. In 2014, two follow up focus groups were conducted with TDJ staff. The second round of focus groups centered on the changes within the organization, current perspectives on the accompaniment model that was created after the initial data collection in 2011–2012, and the use of faith and spirituality in their work as compañeras. See Tables 1 and 2.
Service participant focus groups

A total of six focus groups with service participants were conducted in order to understand their experience with accompaniment services. Service participants were asked questions about their use of social services, perceived barriers to access, their experience with TDJ, what they believed made an effective compañera, how they explained TDJ services to others, how they benefited from TDJ, what could be improved, and their perception of TDJ as a church-sponsored organization.

There were a total of 31 service participants in the focus groups with each focus group having an average of 7–8 members. Purposive sampling procedures were used and focus groups with service participants were conducted until data saturation was reached. Current and former service participants were recruited through TDJ staff, flyers placed in the lobby, and word of mouth. Service participants were 18 years or older and were primarily Spanish speaking or bilingual in English and Spanish. Three service participants spoke only English. Focus groups were conducted in the language of choice for service participants.

Service participants ranged between the ages of 23 and 68 (M = 46.6, SD = 12.1), and 63% (n = 19) of the total sample are female. Ninety-three percent (n = 28) of the participants self-identified as Latinx, 4% (n = 2) identified as Black or African American, and 3% (n = 1) declined to answer. Of those who identified as Latinx, 82% (n = 25) identified as Mexican, 4% (n = 2) as Central American, and 14% (n = 4) reported “other” or...
“nonapplicable.” Thirty-seven percent \((n = 11)\) of the participants reported they were married and 37\% \((n = 11)\) reported they were divorced or separated.

In addition, 42\% \((n = 13)\) of the service participants reported having 8th grade education or below, 26\% \((n = 8)\) had some high school education, but no diploma, 13\% \((n = 4)\) had high school diploma or GED, 13\% \((n = 4)\) had college or technical school, 3\% \((n = 1)\) had a college degree, and 3\% \((n = 1)\) did not report their education level. Participants were asked to note their income level and 70\% \((n = 21)\) stated they earned less than $20,000 a year. More than half of the participants lacked medical insurance (63\%, \(n = 19\)), approximately 30\% \((n = 20)\) were unemployed for more than a year, and 67\% \((n = 20)\) reported children under 18 in the household.

**Analysis**

This qualitative study employs elements of grounded theory. All focus groups were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative software program. The researchers used *In Vivo* coding and open coding, codes emerging from the data, as well as protocol codes that were based on the research questions of the study (Saldaña, 2012). Three researchers were involved in the coding. Cross-coding analysis was conducted in order to review the level of agreement about codes and make decisions about potential discrepancies between coders. Overall, approximately 80\% inter-coder reliability was obtained. From the initial coding, a codebook was developed and focus groups were coded again using the new codebook. Because all of the coders were bilingual, the Spanish transcripts were not translated for analysis. The following section details the results of the analysis and focuses on (a) experiences with other social services, (b) each section of the accompaniment model.

**The accompaniment process**

**Experiences with other social services**

The main theme that emerged during the service participant focus groups was experiences of discrimination as they attempted to access other services. There were 58 separate incidents of discrimination reported during the focus groups. Those that did not report an experience of discrimination \((n = 3)\) were in the minority. For instance, one service participant described her experience in this way:

Oh without a doubt, TDJ helps so much. When I came here, I came with my head down and oh, they lift your spirit [begins to cry] because at other places, I had been stepped on, treated like zero. I am documented, and it’s the same thing,
because of language or because of your skin color. They just look at you and make assumptions. (Service Participant, translated)

It was typical for service participants, regardless of citizenship or immigration status, to report encounters that were perceived as marginalizing. However, those who were undocumented reported additional feelings of fear and distrust. Many of the service participants reported that they felt “doors had been closed on them,” were treated as though they were not telling the truth, or felt judged. These experiences of marginalization were in stark contrast to the experience at TDJ.

**Interdisciplinary accompaniment**

The conceptualization of accompaniment was an iterative process, allowing for continued dialogue and movement between the data and ongoing reflection and conversation. Thus, the accompaniment process (Figure 1) privileges the foundation in liberation theology, Latino theology, and the mission and charism of the Sisters of St Joseph. The process of conceptualizing accompaniment emphasizes both the iterative nature of the process, but also the equitable nature of CBPR between partners throughout the research process (Cacari-Stone, Wallerstein, Garcia, & Minkler, 2014). The following

![Figure 1. Interdisciplinary accompaniment.](image-url)
sections will describe each component of accompaniment as displayed in Figure 1.

This first step in the analysis was categorizing how staff and service participants described the service of accompaniment. Categorizing these forms of accompaniment helped to further develop the specific values and methods of accompaniment. The focus group data revealed three forms of accompaniment: physical or off site, spiritual, and emotional accompaniment.

Physical accompaniment and public health

Accompaniment involves becoming the bridge between the service participant and the resources available. In other words, the compañeras connect the service participants to the service by providing phone numbers or addresses to the necessary agencies. If needed, compañeras call on behalf of the service participants or accompany them on public transportation to the agency. Compañeras frequently translate for the service participants in various environments such as parent-teacher meetings, court cases, lawyer meetings, and so forth. In addition, service participants recounted being helped with completing necessary forms or applications as well as being provided with a translation of such. Service participants appreciated this type of accompaniment and felt supported even when the compañera could not directly intervene in a situation such as a court case:

My compañera is an interpreter, she helps me, she goes with me to court, she helps me fill out papers, she is with me. She has been with me from 8 am until we get out at 3 o’clock in the afternoon. (Service Participant, translated)

The process of physical accompaniment and navigation of institutions is often likened to the patient navigators, who seek to improve access to care by assisting with scheduling appointments, accompaniment, referrals, education, and counseling (Broeckaert & Challacombe, 2014). However, at TDJ, the navigation is applied to all institutions, and while some activities may be similar, the motivations and goals are different. Patient navigators have specific health goals in mind, are expected to impart their knowledge on the clients implying a power differential, and efforts to engage in advocacy may be limited by their role in the health system. Compañeras focus on service participant initiated objectives. The focus is on “walking with” service participants and a desire to create more responsive systems.

Emotional accompaniment and social work

Because of the discrimination experienced at many social service agencies, service participants made note of the respect and support they received through accompaniment, and staff discussed providing this support and treating on service participants with respect. A sense of hope is instilled in
the service participants as the compañera raises their awareness of the different options available for managing their presenting problem. Service participants explained that as they are offered these options, they begin to feel a sense of hope towards a positive resolution. Service participants also felt heard by the compañeras when they told their story. The service participants felt comforted by the unconditional positive regard and the respect the compañeras had for them. A compañera explained:

Sometimes it is just to be a supportive presence, to be an extra set of eyes that’s advocating for them, that’s comforting them and saying, it’s going to be okay. Even if I don’t necessarily have a whole lot of control of the situation, I am there with them in the process.

In addition, compañeras explained that by listening to service participants, they could better understand the presenting problem; and thus, better assess and provide service options. Service participants noted that being listened to allowed them to feel respected, which differed from experiences at other agencies. Notably, service participants brought up the supportive presence the compañeras at TDJ provide, and the relief it brings to the isolation they experience as they work through their challenges. “They gave me a hand to be able to get out that hole, because truthfully I had even gone to a psychologist because I was really depressed. They have helped me emotionally” (Service Participant, translated).

Social work practice with immigrants is grounded in empowerment theory, a specific social work approach that promotes social justice and attends to social power on personal, interpersonal, and political levels (Garcia, 2009; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Payne, 2005). This approach focuses on the development of and use of resources and strategies that attain both personal and collective goals. Specifically, this approach considers the impact and inequity of social structure, opening up alternative knowledge sources and perspectives, and reducing isolation and marginalization. The intersectionality of oppression related to class, race, gender, and other factors are considered. This approach can be psychologically transformative and strengthens connections, which is at the heart of accompaniment. Social work is also known for a strength-based approach, which recognizes the assets that each individual brings, intends to “discover and expand resources,” and works to instill a sense of hope (Saleebey, 2002, p. 9).

Spiritual accompaniment and pastoral ministry
Spirituality and faith was an integral component of the accompaniment process for the compañeras at TDJ. Spirituality provided a framework for how compañeras interacted with and viewed their relationships with service participants. Spirituality also informed and framed the work at the agency, not just with service participants, but between compañeras as well. In terms
of the service participants, the compañeras explained the importance of developing a deeper connection with the service participants. They viewed their work as an opportunity to help others and often referred to work with the service participants as a gift. As the service provider, the compañeras felt rewarded by the experience and valued the trust service participants had in them as well as the positive responses to the service. For some compañeras, this experience was grounded in Catholic social teachings of walking with the service participant during their struggle just as Jesus did. The core Catholic social teachings include the life and dignity of the human person; a call to family, community, and participation; the protection of human rights and our responsibility towards each other, the option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity of work and the protection of worker’s rights; solidarity and peace across differences; and care for God’s creation which includes care for people and the earth (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.). They discussed the importance of remembering to always treat service participants as equal individuals and with dignity. While not all staff shared the same Catholic faith, and had different personal relationships with their own spiritual beliefs, the principle of equality and respect grounded in Catholic social justice teachings framed all of their work. In other words, the compañeras worked to provide the service participant with an environment where they felt respected and treated with dignity.

Because of the challenges faced by many service participants, compañeras acknowledged the importance of instilling hope onto those that receive services from TDJ regardless of the final result of their effort. Compañeras discussed the importance of hope within the Catholic Church: “Don’t forget about St. Joseph [he] was a walker too. St. Joseph struggled to feed his family too, and those are the little gifts that our tradition lets us share with each other and more reasons for hope” (Staff Focus Group, 5/4/2011, Catholic Tradition). During the focus group discussions, compañeras also discussed their efforts toward relieving the isolation. They recognized the importance of “supporting them so that they’re not alone no matter whatever it is you’re looking for” (Staff Focus Group, 5/4/2011, Emotional Definition).

Furthermore, compañeras brought up the importance empowering their service participants. They clarified their intentions by stating they attempted to avoid the service participant’s dependence on them. Although compañeras work toward providing the service participants with the necessary resources to overcome their present challenges, throughout the process, they encourage independence and take on a strengths-based perspective. A compañera explained this approach by stating:

Focus on strengths. That’s what I have learned to do, not dwell on feeling defeated, and then you feed into the service participant’s defeat. It’s just going to exacerbate it and it doesn’t really help anything so if it doesn’t work, you just need to come
back. I have service participants that aren’t successful and I just tell them, well you
know you weren’t successful, but I mean at least you’re safe or you have your kids
or you know whatever, I try and point out other things and then try and come
back here and just look for something else.

In order to successfully instill hope, empowerment, and relieve isolation, staff
described their work as one that involves using their heart. One compañera
described it as “The beautiful thing is that it doesn’t take someone with only
certain intelligence factor and such. It really has to do with the heart” (Staff
Focus Group, 5/4/2011, Skills Required). As part of their religious back-
ground, compañeras seek to provide the service participants with the positive
emotions and optimistic perspectives, which they have noticed many have
lost along their journey. Service participants continuously professed their
appreciation and awareness of the unique treatment received at TDJ com-
pared to other social service agencies.

Additionally, the compañeras discussed their efforts to accompany each
other. Once every two weeks, they meet to discuss service participant cases,
share experiences, and work through emotionally difficult situations. The
compañeras all agreed their group dynamic focused on walking with each
other as they provide their services. The compañeras built upon each other’s
knowledge and constantly provided support to one another. Emphasis was
placed on making sure neither the compañeras nor the service participants
feel alone in any given situation. In addition, the data revealed that there was
a critical process of reflection, change, and support occurring within and
among the compañeras.

Outcomes

Analysis (Figure 2) also focused on perceived outcomes for both compañeras
and service participants. Service participants reciprocated the compañeras’
intentions and discussed the phenomenon of instilling sanguinity. Constantly
repeated, it was recognized that TDJ provides the service participants with a
sense of hope regardless of the final outcome. Many individuals described an
increased feeling of hope while receiving services. Due to previous negative
experiences, service participants expected to be rejected or not heard at TDJ.
However, the compañeras “opened doors, yes, to keep fighting, yes, and
thanks to the compañera, we’re still walking” (Service Participant, translated).
In other words, nearly all service participants but one, noted that they
experienced a change from a pessimistic perspective to a sense of hope.

Additionally, service participants reported that receiving assistance at
Taller resulted in feelings of tranquility, safety, and security. One particular
service participant explained her sense of tranquility from the realization that
someone was willing to help her. She stated “well in the tranquility right, that
at least someone will be there to give me a hand [with this]” (translated).
Service participants acknowledged that the tranquility stemmed from knowing someone would provide the emotional support and no longer feeling a sense of isolation. Service participants made comments such as, “we are not alone; we know we can count on them” (translated) when asked to describe the services. Others described their experience with the organization as one that relieved their nervios (anxiety and fear). Service participants felt a sense of safety because of the support they received at the agency along with an experience that did not include discrimination or microaggressions based on race or immigrant status.

Furthermore, feeling an enhanced sense of comfort was mentioned frequently during the focus groups. Service participants described their experience with compañeras as being interacted with in a friendly manner, and treated with respect and dignity. One service participant stated:

Oh yes I think the person that accompanied me is well prepared, in fact, from the beginning she gave me a sense of comfort. In fact, when we were on the train, since there weren’t any seats left, she didn’t sit down, she didn’t and I didn’t until we both found a seat so that we could continue with our conversation and the treatment was, in my opinion, really good. (Translated)
Service participants spoke about the compañeras’ specific behaviors that created a safe environment, allowing them to feel comfortable. After experiencing threats of deportation and discrimination, feeling safe during the accompaniment service was a new experience to many service participants. Service participants noted different components, which helped to enhance the safe environment, which included church sponsorship of the organization, the warmth of the interaction, and the acceptance. Regardless of race, religion, or past life experiences, service participants felt free of judgment at TDJ. Several service participants reported that TDJ saved them. One stated:

I felt like I was being saved actually. I was like, because I’ve called millions of people throughout my situation to see who can help me and my children and my mom, and no one has taken the time to listen, and when she took the time to listen that made me feel wonderful. I felt like I was being saved, like someone actually cared. (Translated)

After having such negative experiences with other social service agencies, service participants felt a renewed sense of hope as they received the accompaniment. When a service participant was talking about her daughter who also received services from TDJ, she explained, “She was revived, she returned to life thanks to this program.” Service participants arrived at the agency expecting the same maltreatment they received at other agencies. However, as they experience being treated with dignity, they begin to feel the psychological and emotional benefits of accompaniment.

Increasingly throughout the discussions, service participants reiterated their satisfaction and a resulting happiness after working with TDJ. Several participants described the agency as a “blessing.” In particular, one individual expressed his gratitude and explained, “Well actually I have never gone to any other agency. This is the only place that I have gone to and to me, well these people are very friendly, such good people, they just fill you, really, with joy” (translated). Many service participants felt as though the compañeras worked with them in a genuinely caring manner. They pronounced:

I feel so grateful for the service that is given here at Taller de Jose, because the personnel here are very friendly, and they help with the problems that we have, they understand our problems that we have and they feel it, but with all their heart. (translated)

Moreover, several service participants acknowledged that receiving services from the compañeras raised their self-esteem and elevated their mood. One individual stated:

Oh no they do help, they help you a lot [laughs], a lot because we come feeling down and here they listen, they raise your self-esteem because [starts crying] because there are times where people step all over you, they turn you to zero. (translated)
Continuously, service participants noted that the large amount of discrimination faced in society prevents them from confronting presenting challenges with an optimistic point of view. Other individuals reiterated:

From what I have experienced, everything is great. The main thing is that they treat you like people, like humans, that when you come feeling down, they elevate your mood, they help you by treating you this way, they make you feel like a human being and not an old shoe. (translated)

TDJ not only connects individuals in need to services, but their empathic way of treating service participants provides those individuals with more than just phone numbers and referrals.

Service participants stated that due to their low income, it becomes stressful to find the appropriate and affordable services on their own especially for those who lack English skills. One particular service participant stated, “at TDJ they’re going to orient you, whichever is your situation whatever your need is, whether you are or not a person with low income, and there they will help guide you” (translated). TDJ connected the service participants with resources and treated them with respect and dignity during times of mayhem and confusion.

There was a minority of service participants who stated that they did not benefit from TDJ’s assistance. Those individuals tended to describe challenging circumstances. These service participants noted that although the staff referred them to certain resources, they described their issue as far too complicated to be resolved. However, it was stated, “she had all the intention to help me, but unfortunately, no, we had no luck.” Although they were unable to solve their case, participants recognized the effort made by the TDJ staff.

**Social-Political Context**

The model begins with understanding that TDJ exists partly due to the sociopolitical context that creates the conditions for the service of accompaniment. TDJ is located in a predominantly working class, Mexican immigrant community. Twenty six percent of families live below the poverty level and the median income is about $34,000, well below the city average (McCarron, 2004). In addition, approximately half of the population is foreign born (McCarron, 2004). Approximately 83% of the residents are of Mexican origin (Wilson, 2011). The community can be said to represent a stigmatized Mexican immigrant community with high levels of poverty and a worsening disinvestment by the city government since the 1990s (Wilson, 2011). This lack of investment includes overcrowded and underfunded schools; poor school facilities in continued decline; poor housing stock; and lack of repair to roads, parks, and other infrastructure. Little Village also has
the largest number of undocumented immigrants compared to other Chicago communities (Tsao, 2014). As a result, residents of Little Village are significantly impacted by current immigration debates and policies. The xenophobic ideology fueled by the framing of Mexican migrants as “illegal” (Massey & Pren, 2012, p. 9), “criminals,” and as a “threat” (Massey & Pren, 2012, p. 9) has created a surge of anti-immigrant measures at both local and national levels (Massey & Pren, 2012). This anti-immigrant context continues and has intensified during the Trump administration. Given this context, Massey and Pren (2012) argue that the only outcome to this context is “...the creation of a large underclass that is permanently divorced from American society and disenfranchised from its resources, with little hope for upward mobility” (p. 15). It is precisely in this context that the sisters of St. Joseph, the congregation sponsoring TDJ, are called to serve. The sisters of St. Joseph emphasize unity, inclusivity, and responding to unmet needs (Brazda, 2011, 2014).

**Systems change**

The addition of a systems change component came later in the development process. During the second set of staff focus groups, when asked to reflect on the model, compañeras added notes to the diagram that included phrases such as “the system,” “the obstacles people face,” “focus on the system,” “accompany institutions,” and “change systems.” Later, these diagrams with staff notes were used during a team meeting, and a discussion ensued about the need to incorporate a systemic change piece into the accompaniment process. The group discussed that what made accompaniment “special” was the multiple levels of impact (Team Meeting, 8/21/14). This work of systems change is accomplished through a process that the staff described as “accompaniment of institutions” and challenging institutions to become more responsive to their service participants through the accompaniment process. In this way, the process of accompaniment dovetails with a cultural humility approach, which not only emphasizes individual changes, but also how those individual level changes are parallel to system and organization change (Fisher-Born, Montana Cain, & Martin, 2015).

**Study limitations**

This study was based on a nonrandom, purposive sample of service participants. Thus, we may not have captured the full range of experiences of persons who may not have been as impacted by TDJ services as those willing to participate in the focus groups. While we felt that we had data saturation with the service participants, we could only hold a limited number of focus groups with compañeras based on the small number of staff and volunteers. In addition, this model may yet evolve, as it has been an iterative process,
with greater reflection and awareness as a result of conceptualization of the model and further discussions. Finally, this study focused on one agency, in a specific community. It is difficult to generalize this experience to other ethnic or racial groups or parts of the country, for example.

Discussion

Results demonstrate key components of the TDJ model of accompaniment, which distinguish it from other forms of accompaniment present in the literature. TDJ provides accompaniment in three domains: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Each of these components works together to create a unique experience for service participants. Service participants felt respected, empowered, and reported less isolation and stress. While TDJ provides very concrete services, such as literally accompanying individuals to services or being physically present, it was the experience framed by the Catholic social teachings and the emotional support that made a significant impact on service participants. At times, when a *compañera* could not provide a concrete resource such as housing or financial assistance, service participants found comfort in the unconditional positive regard and the emotional presence of a *compañera* as they listened to the participant’s story. In this case, the service was not a tangible resource, rather the *compañera’s* supportive presence. Future work can build on this conceptualization in order to develop quantitative measures of outcomes related to these domains, thus better understanding the impact of accompaniment services. However, most significant is the degree to which foundational values based in a faith perspective provided a unique approach that distinguished accompaniment at TDJ from other types of services in social work or public health. The foundational values not only had an impact on service participant outcomes, but also have the potential to address staff burn out and agency culture and climate.

This study provides a framework for a new model for social service delivery and assistance, particularly within an immigrant Latinx community. Agencies can build on the work of TDJ in order to assist in minimizing the gap in access to services for vulnerable and marginalized communities. The conceptualization of “accompaniment” can facilitate replication of this model. By defining accompaniment, organizations such as TDJ can begin to evaluate services, and potentially access grants and other funding in order to develop the organization and services. This study has major implications for service delivery in the Latinx community for social work, public health, and ministry. Service participants emphasized the differences in their experiences with TDJ, particularly with regard to the experience of being treated with dignity and respect in stark contrast to experiences with other social service agencies. Even if agencies do not replicate the accompaniment services offered at TDJ, they can re-evaluate their own service approach and the
experience of individuals attempting to access their services. Finally, the belief that compañeras and the service participants are also system change agents must be a topic of further research. The systems change component is perceived to be one of the factors that make that work unique. Conceptualizing this and identifying changes in organizations and systems as a result of accompaniment should be further documented. This study has the potential to contribute to the rich literature emerging in the area of social justice oriented social work practice, as stated by Finn (2016), “Our commitment to social justice calls for an integrated approach in which social work is both an act of resistance and an act of hope” (p. 379). In the context of anti-immigrant rhetoric and other serious challenges to social justice, accompaniment can offer us a tool and a framework to be mindful of how our interactions with systems and individuals can be opportunities to instill hope, change systems, and empower communities.

Notes

1. Latinx is a gender inclusive alternative to Latino, Latina, and Latin@. Scholars, activists, and an increasing number of journalists are increasingly using the term as a way to be more inclusive of individuals who do not identify with a heteronormative or binary gender identity.

2. Mexican is used here to include those who are U.S. born of Mexican ancestry as well as immigrants. In this context, it can signify national origin, a racial identification, and ethnic identification.

3. There was significant debate about what was the best term to use for the clients of TDJ. While the agency refers to service participants as “clients,” in a Latin American context, the word clients translates into a business model and is not used in social work in Mexico or Latin America. Instead “service user” was used in that context. However, given the goals and focus on empowerment of TDJ, service user seemed passive and did not express the client experience at TDJ. Thus, service participant seemed the most acceptable as it provided a sense of agency among the clients and reflected a more mutual relationship between the compañera and the service participant.

4. Throughout the article, compañeras in the feminine form is used. Compañerismo, or accompaniment, was a gendered experience at TDJ. All but one of the staff members at the time of the study were women. Thus, while both men and women do accompaniment, I will use the feminine throughout.

5. Compañera/o is Spanish for companion. Because accompaniment comes from a Latin American context, and the agency staff refer to themselves as compañeras and compañeros, the Spanish form is used throughout the article. In addition, there is not an adequate English word that captures the relationship and meaning of compañera/o.

6. Other organizations such as immigrant rights organizations provide other forms of accompaniment. For example, the Interfaith Committee for Detained Immigrants provide accompaniment in the form of transportation upon release, postdetention support packs with clothing and hygiene essentials, and assistance in securing a temporary place to stay upon release.

7. Latinx mujerista is a liberatory theology that focuses on the preferential option for Latinx women and their struggle for liberation as members of a community.
8. An estimated 200,000 civilians were killed or disappeared during the civil war. Most of those killed or disappeared were of Mayan descent.
9. Patient navigators are health-care based. They provide assistance such as referral to support services and translation in an effort to ensure access and continuity of care regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Broeckaert & Challacombe, 2014).

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