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An Analysis of Community Health Workers and its Prospect as a Profession

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Senior Project

Suffolk University

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program, Department of Psychology

Professor Lance Swenson

**Abstract**

This literature paper reviews the purpose of community health workers, how they impact community access to health systems and services, and the professional prospects for this career path. In this paper, I discuss how community health workers integrate the main pillars of liberation psychology, specifically the concepts of problematization, *acompañamiento*, and praxis into their day-to-day responsibilities. The goal of community health workers is to help people navigate complex health systems, raise awareness about health-related topics, organize interventions, and advocate for patients to receive health services. Throughout this literature paper, I analyzed the position of community health workers and contemplated my own intersectional identity as a Latina, multilingual woman, and my professional, academic, and personal experience at Suffolk. Through this research, I learned more about the significance of this position and have considered this as a possible future direction for myself.

## **An Analysis of Community Health Workers and its Prospect as a Profession**

### **Introduction**

In the field of health, there have been many communities that have historically been mistreated by the medical field and therefore, have lost trust for medical and health professionals. Oftentimes, these communities have been marginalized communities that are already affected by numerous other factors that increase health disparities. Consequently, the role of community health workers has been crucial to bridge the gap between communities and the health field, especially for the promotion of mental and physical wellness among communities.

### ***What are community health workers?***

Community health workers are responsible for promoting health within a community and supporting people to adopt healthy habits. Community health workers foster connections with their communities and advance the overall health of a community by teaching and advocating for individuals and groups to be able to achieve their health and wellness needs (“Occupation profile for...,” 2022). Community health workers carry out a variety of functions including making educational presentations or programs on different health topics, providing preventative services, leading individual and group therapy, case management, patient advocacy and handling crisis interventions. Additionally, community health workers can implement services or programs that advance, preserve, and boost the health of individual people and the community as a whole. Given that community health workers help people communicate with their health providers and social service agencies, they act as a support network for community members and advocates for the health needs of individuals in the community (“Occupation profile for...,” 2022). Community health workers are also responsible for the connection between communities and health systems.

They can also collect data to help identify the specific health needs of a community (“Occupation profile for...,”2022).

***What is the relevance of community health in connection with behavioral and mental health services?***

Within the field of community health, there also exists a subfield of community mental health. Community mental health is publicly funded mental health services that aim to incorporate multidisciplinary, systemic, and inclusive methods (Beck, 2008). It is available to anyone residing in a designated geographical region, regardless of their ability to pay (Beck, 2008). Community mental health employees work in community mental health centers operated by local governments (“What is Community...,” 2022). Community mental health centers can be financially supported by federal and state county funding programs, through federal funding programs such as Medicaid and Medicare, private insurance, and cash payments (“What is Community Mental...,”2021). Community mental health workers evaluate and treat people with substance abuse, mental and/or emotional challenges. Their responsibilities may involve education, case management, prevention, individual and group therapy, client advocacy, and crisis intervention (“Community Health Workers...,” 2023).

***What is liberation psychology?***

Liberation psychology is a type of anti-oppressive theory whose goal is to resist oppression and marginalization and it is shaped on the basis that “all knowledge is socially and politically constructed ... [therefore,] knowledge is the product of interaction among people” (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020, p. 43). Moreover, since liberation psychology is an anti-oppressive theory, it presumes to be subjective and takes on the perspective that there can exist various positions regarding sociohistorical experiences (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020).

Furthermore, the stance of liberation psychology is that people's lived experiences influence the subjective knowledge, and that social position, personal privileges, and oppression are the factors that define how people understand knowledge (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). The focal point of liberation psychology is society's poor and marginalized populations. Philosophy of liberation, liberation pedagogy, community psychology, theology of liberation, and critical sociology are all movements that influenced liberation psychology (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020).

***What are the principles of liberation psychology that are pertinent to community health work?***

There are 9 core main principles of liberation psychology which include reorientation of psychology, recovering historical memory, deideologizing everyday experience, denaturalization, problematization, virtues of the people, conscientization, power dynamics, and praxis (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). For the following literature review paper, I decided to focus on the following concepts of liberation psychology: problematization, praxis, and *acompañamiento* and their connection to community health work. Problematization is a process that intends to critically analyze external circumstances and how they may affect a person or people, which leads to examining how these circumstances are normally explained and the factors usually considered. It involves using the point of view of the oppressed to form an understanding of the issues faced by oppressed populations (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). Praxis is the alignment of theory and practice. In other words, it is the application of theory in the real world (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). *Acompañamiento* is when individuals purposefully embrace and undergo social conditions alongside those who have been affected by these social conditions and by interconnected systems of oppression. So essentially, it is to stand with people (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020).

***What are the goals of this review?***

The goals of this literature review are to examine whether community health workers incorporate the principles of liberation psychology into their practice and how they do so, explore my own intersectional identity as I explore this possible career path, and review how my academic and personal experiences at Suffolk have prepared me for the next steps.

**Rationale**

As I am completing my final semester at Suffolk University, the topic of next steps and future direction have been a large part of my conversations with friends, family, professors, and classmates. While embarking on the process of job searching and self-reflection of what I would like my career path to look like, the position of community health worker has come up a number of times. I first learned about this profession through a career development program that I took over the 2023 summer. I became curious about the profession because it combined my interest of wanting to give back to the community and leveraging my language skills, and it aligned with my values. Moreover, during my internship at California Primary Care Association, I developed a more extensive awareness of the specific role of community health workers and their impact on community engagement concerning health services. Additionally, through the classes I have taken at Suffolk, I have gained a better understanding of the importance of cultural awareness and humility and how different psychology approaches can lead to varying levels of efficacy. Therefore, I decided to focus this literature review paper on community health workers to understand how this position is influenced by psychology and to determine whether this profession could be a potential opportunity for my future career development.

## Methods

I used EBSCOhost, a research platform provided by Suffolk's Mildred F. Library, to research reliable and relevant sources. I compiled resources on the impact of community health workers and predominantly identified those that were U.S.-based and incorporated an intersectional perspective.

## Literature Review

This literature review paper will provide an overview of the purpose of community health workers, their impact, and the professional prospects for this career. Subsequently, this paper will incorporate summaries of research articles that exemplify how the core principles of liberation psychology have been integrated into the roles of community health workers.

***What is the purpose of community health workers and what are important factors for being one?***

In the article "Community health worker roles and their evolving interprofessional relationships in the United States," the authors described the expanding role of community health workers in the U.S. health system (Washburn et al., 2022). The authors recruited 71 community health workers to participate in a focus group and to observe recurring themes for the integration of community health workers into interprofessional care teams (Washburn et al., 2022). Their findings showed that once community health workers were able to fully integrate into interprofessional care teams, they were able to efficiently address the social determinants of health for community members. The authors also noted that cultural competency, the ability to relate to the community members, trust, time, and a strong grasp on how health and social systems worked improved their efficiency at providing assistance. The authors illustrated how the role of community health workers is strongly tied to their cultural competency and their



capacity to identify with and understand community members more so than traditional health professionals (Washburn et al., 2022). Similarly, in the article “Adapting Community Health Worker Care Models to Advance Mental Health Services Among LGBTQ Youth,” the authors found that intersectionality and social proximity are other important factors for supporting marginalized or minority populations (Barnett et al., 2023). The authors from this article also noted that when individuals, such as community health workers, have expansive knowledge on cultural norms and health care access, there are better outcomes for the community (Barnett et al., 2023).

***What is the impact of community health workers on the health of a community?***

As I conducted my research, numerous research articles cited studies which had found positive effects from the integration of community health workers in a community. For instance, in “Using Community Health Workers to Improve Health Outcomes in a Sample of Hispanic Women and Their Infants: Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial,” the article described how one pilot study in Pittsburg found that interventions led by community health workers to improve healthy nutrition and physical activity among Latina families with preschool-aged children showed that these measures were effective (Lutenbacher et al., 2023). The same article also noted that results from a trial that “phone support offered by *promotoras* [label for community health workers in Spanish] was a positive predictor for exclusive [breastfeeding] duration” (Lutenbacher et al., 2023, p. 130). In addition, in the article “Early Childhood Referrals by HealthySteps and Community Health Workers,” the authors conducted a study to explore “how a community health worker within a primary care team with a HealthySteps Specialist impacted referrals to social determinant of health resources for families with children aged birth to 5 years” (Germán et al., 2023, p. 321). The study found that the group with the HealthySteps

Specialist and the community health worker, rather than just a HealthSteps Specialist, had a better rate for successful referrals, 96% as opposed to 74% for the HealthSteps Specialist only group (Germán et al., 2023). These results led the authors to conclude that there was a “a significant association between the referral outcome and having a CHW on a primary care team with an HS Specialist” (Germán et al., 2023, p. 321) The findings outlined in these research articles demonstrated that there are documented benefits of having community health workers involved in patient care, and that the evidence is growing. Additionally, research has shown that interventions led by community health workers can improve diabetes results, reduce the use of medical services, promote the detection of cancer, lower the risks of cardiovascular disease, among other benefits (Ignoffo et al., 2023).

***What are the professional prospects for community health workers?***

Considering there is growing evidence that demonstrates that community health workers are efficient resources and tools to promote healthy habits and to address social determinants of health, my research also showed that there is an expansion of opportunities for the profession of community health workers. In recent years, the perception of community health workers has shifted. Increasingly there are research studies and focus groups that are demonstrating that using community health workers is an efficient strategy to improve the health conditions for communities. With the growth of evidence backing up the advantages of community health workers, there has also been a growth in community health worker positions across the United States. According to data from the data come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Projections, as of 2022, there are 67,200 community health workers employed across the United States. By 2032, the number of community health workers employed in the U.S. is expected to reach 76,600 employees, which means it will grow around 14% (“Occupation profile

for...,”2022). There are a variety of sectors where community health workers can find employment, these workplaces include community organization, hospitals, public health departments, social services, ambulatory medical services, religious, civil, grantmaking, professional and similar organizations (“Community Health Workers...,” 2023). However, historically the largest employers for community health workers has been community organizations and public health departments (“Community Health Workers...,” 2023). In the United States, as of 2022, the median yearly wage for community health workers was \$46,190, and as of 2022, the median hourly wage was \$22.21 (“Occupation profile for...,”2022).

***How does the concept of problematization relate to community health work?***

Community health work embodies a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach. The undertakings and functions of community health workers oftentimes align with the framework of the principles of liberation psychology. The subsequent example shows how the principle of problematization can be applied towards community health workers. *Liberation Psychology: Theory, Method, Practice, and Social Justice* defines problematization as a process in which people engage in an in-depth investigation of the conditions of people’s lives and how these conditions affect them (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). The goal of this in-depth investigation is to challenge the traditional explanations and considerations of certain circumstances (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). The following research article exemplifies how the principle of problematization emerges within the role of community health workers. In “A Community-Engaged Process for Adapting a Proven Community Health Worker Model to Integrate Precision Cancer Care Delivery for Low-income Latinx Adults with Cancer,” the authors describe the study they conducted in Monterrey, California (Wood et al., 2023). The authors of the study used a community-partnered and evidence-based approach to lead the study

and to modify the interventions for cancer care delivery. The purpose of the study was to create better intervention strategies and equitable delivery of cancer care and precision medicine for low-income and racial and/or ethnic minority populations. Moreover, the study's overall aim was to: "(1) adapt [community health worker (CHW)]-led goals of care, symptom assessment intervention and integrate precision medicine education for low-income, Latinx populations with cancer; (2) evaluate the effect of the adapted CHW-led intervention on precision medicine knowledge and receipt of evidence-based cancer care among low-income, Latinx populations with cancer; and (3) develop and disseminate a toolkit that includes CHW training materials, educational resources for patients, and workflows" (Wood et al., 2023, p. 492). The study's findings led to numerous adaptations to how there is integration of precision care delivery for Latinx people with cancer, how interventions are carried out, partnership with community engagement, the language and type of materials for interventions, and listening and meeting the needs of the community (Wood et al., 2023). For example, one of the crucial changes that were made was specifically towards changing the eligibility criteria so that community health workers could contact patients by calling them, meeting them in-person, or using telehealth (Wood et al., 2023). This methodology and process for the study illustrates the principle of problematization because it aims to change and adapt an issue by directly asking an oppressed population how the approach could be better. The study interviews Latinx populations to directly find out how to develop better intervention strategies and equitable delivery of cancer care and precision medicine. Then, once the information was collected from the interviews, it was shared with community advisors with lived experiences, who then refined the information into final adaptations based on the initial comments of the oppressed population, in this case Latinx people from Monterrey. Thus, this study fully exhibits liberation psychology's process of

problematization. Although, this is only one example of problematization, the principle of problematization is the basis of how community health workers undertake their responsibilities and shape how future health programs, interventions, or educational initiatives come about, by listening to the needs and demands of a community and collecting that information.

***How does the principle of praxis relate to community health work?***

As community health workers, it is immensely important that information that is disseminated to communities is accurate and precise. The information that community health workers share is trusted as true by those whom it reaches. For this reason, it is crucial that the information of the content is based on applicable theory and established facts and methods of practice. Thus, praxis, which is the alignment of theory and practice, is tremendously critical for the field of community health work. The research article, “The Creation of a Field Manual for Community Health Workers to Teach Child Health and Development During Home Visits: A Case Study of Participatory Content Creation,” details how theory is used to create a guidebook for community health workers (Westgard et al., 2023). The goal of the guidebook is for community health workers to have access to a resource that has accurate, up-to-date, and clear information. The guidebook also serves as a tool to explain different health messages while doing home visits or interaction with patients or clients (Westgard et al., 2023). This guidebook was formulated by using health behavior theory, specifically, the Health Belief Model. The authors decided on 38 health topics to include in the guidebook, and they intentionally arranged phrases and words to communicate their message and to incorporate the 5 dimensions of the Health Belief Model so that the model was referenced within the phrases used (Westgard et al., 2023). This article exemplified the importance of praxis because it showed how a health-related

theory was being worked into an applicable resource and tool for both community health workers and community members.

***How does the concept of *acompañamiento* relate to community health work?***

Frequently, the role of community health workers is to guide client, patients, or community members through different health systems or health-related situations. It is the norm for community health workers to have lived experience and to share the culture, language, and/or circumstances as members of the community. When community health workers are able to share common traits, characteristics, and identities with the community's population, it facilitates trust-building, communication, connection, and mutual respect. In liberation psychology, there is a concept called *acompañamiento*, which translates to psychosocial accompaniment. In *Liberation Psychology: Theory, Method, Practice, and Social Justice*, Jesica Siham Fernández explains *acompañamiento* as a “process that unfolds and evolves from standing with and alongside communities, through building relationships and everyday lived experiences of adaptation, assistance, compassion, and witnessing” and that it “implicates feelings of mutual vulnerability and struggle through cobeing” (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020, p. 93) The following study outlined and described in “Using Community Health Workers to Improve Health Outcomes in a Sample of Hispanic Women and Their Infants: Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial,” exemplifies the importance of *acompañamiento* and how it can impact the health outcomes of individuals (Lutenbacher et al., 2023). In the study from this article, the authors aimed to test whether using community health workers would improve the maternal/infant outcomes among Hispanic women 15 months postpartum. The study results found that when qualified community health workers who were from the target community executed home visits that were guided by a structured curriculum, there were positive health outcomes for pregnant Hispanic women and

their infants (Lutenbacher et al., 2023). For the purpose of this study, all the hired community health workers were required to be from the local Hispanic community, to share the same culture and/or language as the target clients, and to respect children and enjoy parenting, and there was no educational requirement for the position. The employed community health workers then organized home visits with the pregnant Hispanic women and supported them with breastfeeding, safe sleep practices, parenting stress, achieving parenting competence and satisfaction, assessing and making referrals for postnatal depression, mitigating the risks of mental health difficulties for their child as well as their own, and improving the quality of their home environments (Lutenbacher et al., 2023). In this study, the community health workers embodied the concept of *acompañamiento* because they stood with the Hispanic mothers. The community health workers were able to build genuine relationships with the mothers that were founded on care and solidarity, and thus, were able to help improve the overall wellbeing and results for both the mothers and their children. As shown by this study, *acompañamiento* is a powerful resource for community health workers to have because it can result in more positive health outcomes.

***What is the overall connection between liberation psychology and community health work?***

It is evident that community health work and liberation psychology share many similar frameworks. Both approaches are based on the values of putting the community first, especially historically marginalized or minority communities, and basing implementation strategies on the data directly collected from community members rather than experts in the field or clinicians. Much of the research relating to or incorporating community health works were also founded on community-based participatory research, evidence-based interventions, and community-partnered and practice-based approaches.

## **Discussion**

In this literature review paper, I reviewed the profession of community health workers as a whole, its professional prospects, and its relation to liberation psychology. This paper provided an overview of the purpose of community health workers and their roles within health and social systems. Additionally, this paper discussed example studies and research that has demonstrated how community health workers can have a positive influence on communities and health services. Besides information on what community health workers do and how they operate, this paper also incorporates profession-specific information about community health workers and the expected future growth for this career path. Furthermore, this paper also explained the connection between liberation psychology and community health workers. Specifically, this paper used research articles to illustrate how three principles of liberation psychology are integrated into community health work.

For this literature review paper, I researched different articles that conducted studies on community health workers and that described the elements that influence community health workers. Based on my research, the prominence of academic analyses on community health workers is growing and expanding, especially as the profession as a whole is becoming more popular; however, there are still more research, studies and focus groups to be done in the future to truly understand the impact of community health workers.

Although, I was able to find many resources on community health workers, I was unable to find any research articles or sources that made direct link between liberation psychology and community health work. However, even though there were not research articles that discussed these topics explicitly, a large portion of the resources I found and used for this literature review had indirect themes of liberation psychology within the articles on community health workers.



Therefore, further research is needed to establish direct and explicit ties between the principles of liberation psychology and the type of roles and responsibilities that community health workers have in communities and the health industry.

After having done extensive research on community health workers, I think the career path is rewarding and dynamic. It is a position in which individuals can give back to their community and be a source of knowledge and leadership. While doing research, I also noticed that there was a multitude of research articles that focused on community health workers and the Latinx community. Given I am fluent in Spanish, and I am also Latina, this is a position that I feel that I could envision myself doing. I also liked how there are a variety places where community health workers could work, which gives you more options to find a position in your place of preference. In my opinion, this career path allows individuals to gain substantial awareness and knowledge about the health, medical and social systems and exposes people to numerous types of professions and careers. Given that community health workers are constantly interacting with so many systems, I feel that this position could also help people figure out what type of career path they would like to pursue and in what type of work environment they would like to be in.

## **Conclusion**

The profession of community health worker is becoming increasingly relevant in today's society. Community health workers have an important position within the health industry, and it is a profession that is expanding and growing very quickly. There are progressively more reach articles and studies that are providing evidence for the efficiency and advantage of integrating community health workers within different health spaces. The role of community health workers is immensely beneficial for marginalized and oppressed populations because community health

workers serve to bridge a gap between these types of populations and the medical and health system. Community health workers are uniquely positioned to decrease health disparities and to address social determinants of health since more thoroughly embedded and in direct contact with communities. As the profession community health workers amplifies, further research studies will need to be conducted on the true effects and impacts of community health workers on communities.

Community health work is also strongly tied to the values and principles of liberation psychology. This literature review paper presented different studies that exemplified three concepts of liberation psychology. The concepts included *problematization*, *praxis*, and *acompañamiento*. Although these liberation psychology concepts are not explicitly referenced within community health work, based on the approach and function of community health work, it is evident that the concepts of liberation psychology are integrated into the practice of community health work. For future references, researchers should study the similarities and connections between liberation psychology and community health work. Furthermore, future works should directly describe how liberation psychology influences community health work and what additional principles of liberation psychology could be integrated in community health work.

Overall, community health workers are exceedingly important for our current health systems and represent a changing perspective on accessing health care with more emphasis being placed on the community and community engagement and involvement.

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