

Melissa Ponce-Rodas

AHSRA 2018 Poster Abstract

Working Title:

9 days, 20 volunteers, Over 1,000 people Reached: How We Translated Psychological Research into Practice

Authors:

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Full Abstract:

Acepta, Habla, Sana. Acepta, Talk, Heal. For 9 days, this was the mental health awareness message that our group of 20 volunteers tried to leave with as many Puerto Ricans as possible. We traveled to over 30 different locations, were on two radio shows, and part of two televised sermons on Sabbath. Our work was also highlighted in "El Vocero" a Puerto Rican newspaper on the island. For us, this was an amazing outcome for our original, simple desire to take our knowledge and share it with our brothers and sisters who were suffering. We took research, ours and the extant literature base, and created a simple program of psychoeducation, culturally relevant messages on how to take care of your mental health after a disaster and how to help others.

On September 20, 2017, the island of Puerto Rico was hit by a category 4 hurricane, indicating winds of approximately 155 mph. The island was already trying to recover from Hurricane Irma passing nearby only a week before, which left over 1 million without power, and 56,000 without water (Retrieved on April 8, 2018 from <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/hurricane-irma/hurricane-irma-skirts-puerto-rico-lashing-it-powerful-winds-flooding-n799086>). "Maria", as people on the island now describe the hurricane, ravaged the island. No power, no water, roads destroyed, people and towns isolated by debris, total devastation. Everyone was impacted. Disasters of this magnitude are rare, but their effects are among the worst (Norris, Freedman & Watson, 2002) While initial efforts were aimed at providing for physical needs, such as food and water, as well as road rebuilding and home repairs, very little has targeted mental health. Our first night on the island we were reminded of this by a survivor. "Puerto Rico has received a lot of help, but almost nothing like this, like what you brought us tonight" he said, in response to our mental health workshop. Norris and colleagues (2002), in their review of disaster impacts and recovery stated that an ecological approach, targeting multiple levels is the most appropriate response to large scale disasters where many have been impacted. This is what we developed, and this is what we shared with the people of Puerto Rico.

This poster focuses on the experiences of one community psychologist who coordinated the trip, and two clinical mental health counseling psychology students who volunteered. Melissa will

describe the development of the project, and the ecological approach that guided it. Alisha and Mary will discuss how they used their counseling training and research to inform their roles, presentations and interactions with people on the island. The poster will include limitations, lessons learned and implications for future work both in Puerto Rico, and for other disaster relief efforts.

Short Abstract:

During 9 days in Puerto Rico, over 1,000 people were reached. Melissa, a community psychologist, will describe the ecological approach used to develop and guide the intervention. Alisha and Mary will discuss how they used their counseling work to inform their roles, presentations and interactions with people on the island.