Running Head: Graphic *Novela* and Mexican American Families

Graphic *Novela:*

Mexican American Families' Use of Community Services for Older Adults

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Notes

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Abstract

Knowledge gaps exist about how to help Mexican American (MA) families seek assistance when their capacity to assist older family members is challenged. MA families may resist confronting unpleasant but real situations with the older adult, e.g., the need to access long term support services (LTSS), because of cultural and structural barriers. The purpose was to describe stakeholders' reactions to a culturally focused graphic *novela* created in partnership with a community advisory council. Qualitative description with content analysis of a focus group's reactions to the graphic novela was used. Results included positive reactions as well as suggestions for improvement and dissemination. Graphic novelas can be an effective medium for modeling conversations about older adults' needing additional care, and demonstrating how to identify and access available LTSS or other services. Included is a description of the researchers' process of partnering with diverse stakeholders, which is essential for creating new solutions.

Graphic *Novela:* Mexican American Families' Use of Community Services

Mexican American (MA) families can often be close-knit units which may lead to resisting outside assistance to care for family members. This phenomenon is partly based on cultural norms, particularly when it comes to caring for older adult family members. Specifically, two norms are "taking care of our own" (Mendez-Luck et al., 2016) and not directly confronting unpleasant situations which may be viewed as disrespectful (Adames, 2014). Additionally, just as important as cultural barriers is families' experience with structural barriers. For example, information is often not presented in understandable ways for diverse groups, resulting in lack of understanding about and trust in services (Crist et al., 2019a).

The authors present a small community-partnered descriptive study designed to create a culturally appropriate graphic novel about using long term support services (LTSS) and to elicit local stakeholders' reactions to an initial version. Also presented are the process of community partnering to create the prototype and the future steps for improving and disseminating the graphic novela.

Background and Purpose

Frequently "caregiving families," i.e., families facing older family members' needs related to aging, experience financial and health consequences of caring for older family members, spending almost 50% of their annual income on caregiving costs (AARP, 2021). MA families often either do not know about services (Crist et al., 2015), or, rather than accept help from community agencies, choose to face these hardships on their own (Mendez-Luck & Anthony, 2015). Not using available services can result in unexpected outcomes. Health outcomes may include physical strain, stress and conflict, chronic illness, or nursing home

placement (Chen & Zissimopoulos, 2018; Mendez-Luck et al., 2016; National Caregiving Alliance (2020).

Research has demonstrated that simple *novela* venues (i.e., short stories, such as *telenovelas*—soap opera type dramas; *radionovelas*—dramas heard over the radio; *fotonovelas*—comic books with actual photographs; or graphic *novelas*—comic books using cartoon figures) are effective culturally congruent media for presenting health messages to underserved, including Latinx, audiences (Crist et al., 2015; Hernandez & Organista, 2015, Pappas-DeLuca, 2008). Some sources use the terms "fotonovela" and "graphic novela" interchangeably (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2012). Fotonovelas have been documented to be successful, e.g., as part of promotoras' interventions to teach MA adults control their blood pressure (Balcazar et al., 2009).

Graphic novela projects have been shown to be successful for underserved populations, for example, for colorectal cancer screening,). depression, immunizations, cancer screening, diabetes, safety, and stigma (Christy et al., 2019; Grigsby et al., 2017; Reyes-Rodríguez et al., 2016). The MA response to graphic novela educational tools has been positive (Terrill, 2017). Comic books provide a favorite entertainment venue for MA caregiving families (Conway, 2019), and can be applicable for both caregivers and older adults. Aligned with the tenets of the narrative pedagogy framework (Scheckel & Ironside, 2006), cartoon type graphic novelas have been used to employ humor to normalize serious topics such as safety, falls, and immunization decision-making (Muzumdar & Pantaleo, 2017) while appealing to the emotions under the surface, being culturally familiar, and offering a simple way to communicate with adults at all health literacy levels (Hernandez & Organista, 2015).

Although interventions using graphic novelas are not designed with the goal of trying to change cultural beliefs, such interventions may impart information in a non-confrontational format, improve understanding, and model new behaviors, thus facilitating informed decisions. What has not been developed, explored, or tested is the graphic novela venue as a source for MA caregiving family members to address the need for help beyond what they can give to their aging family member.

The researchers aimed to investigate if featuring a family with an older adult, called "*Nana,*" in a graphic novela, could open dialogue between the older adult and family members and influence the willingness of the older adult and family caregiver to seek and accept assistance from LTSS. The purpose of the study was to evaluate a culturally focused graphic novela created in partnership with a community advisory council. The graphic novela was designed to both model family conversations and impart information about using LTSS. The specific aims for this study were: **(Aim 1)** Describe MA caregivers' and older adults' preferences for content and presentation in a graphic novela regarding considering and accessing LTSS. **(Aim 2)** Describe MA caregivers' and older adults' visions of how a graphic novela could be disseminated to generate discussion with MA caregiving families regarding accessing LTSS .

Theoretical Framework

Community learning, "narrative pedagogy," has been proposed to promote public thinking and speaking (Diekelmann, 2001). Within this framework, role models can exemplify how to change behaviors while still being true to cultural norms (Acosta et al., 2019b). This perspective previously underpinned a telenovela intervention to promote awareness, confidence, and trust in LTSS enacted by characters with whom the audience could easily identify. As in the telenovela, the characters of the graphic novela as role models promoted a sense of familiarity

while demonstrating desired behaviors (Crist et al., 2015). With graphic novelas, a culturally appropriate story may shape a clear, appealing, and easy to grasp medium to impart values and information (Koops van't Jagt et al., 2016). For example, applying these principles, graphic novelas could model behaviors such as agreeing to explore information about, and beginning using, LTSS.

Interventions for MA families necessitate demonstrating support of the cultural norm of *familismo*, the value of family centrality, especially including support for older adult members (Mendez-Luck et al., 2016). Also, MA communication is interlaced with cultural norms of *respeto,* which may include avoiding, or only speaking indirectly about, uncomfortable issues (Adames et al., 2014), for example, when MA caregiving families need to discuss using formal assistance to avoid unnecessary complications. In such topics, likely viewed as too direct and impolite to discuss with their older loved ones, communication often is approached indirectly through metaphors, or colloquialisms, called "*dichos*" in Spanish (Espinoza-Herold, 2007). Likewise, the graphic novela is a non-confrontational way to present a new perspective. Using familiar communication patterns like dichos and characters easily identified with, the graphic novela helps normalize family situations. Then MA audiences may become more open to considering discussing options such as using LTSS, as they grapple with these situations.

Methods

Community Based Participatory Research

As part of the team's community based participatory research (CBPR) approach, the "ENCASA" Community Advisory Council, composed of local MA lay people and community service providers, collaborated on the study. ENCASA is an acronym for "**E**lder a**N**d **C**aregiver **A**ssistance and **S**upport **A**t Home." ENCASA had supported the research team for over 20 years,

with approximately 20 members meeting four times a year with the team (Crist et al., 2009). The Co-I was founder and facilitator of ENCASA. ENCASA members' participation was fundamental to this study, promoting the community capacity and cultural fidelity of the graphic novela, as follows.

Development of Graphic Novela

Of the two types of comic book novelas, a graphic novela, containing pictures in cartoon form, was proposed. The community partners agreed with the literature that older people would rather identify with a fictional cartoon character than with an actual photographed person, because photographs of older adults tend to look older and unappealing compared to individuals' own self-image of themselves (Koops van't Jagt et al., 2016).

After the specific medium had been selected, members attending ENCASA's April 2019 quarterly meeting were asked to draw their own mothers, or an *abuela* or nana (MA grandmother) character, simply, depicting characteristics such as typical clothing, hairstyles, and body types, in order to develop a prototype. It was noted that members' drawings were similar. Descriptions of visual characteristics were given to the graphic artist.

One co-author (the seventh author), also a member of ENCASA, who was a member of a national group of graphic and comic artists, contacted three comic artists. Together she, the eighth author who was also an artist, and the co-investigator (Co-I; the ninth author), reviewed the three artists' cartoons online and selected one whose cartoon examples most closely matched ENCASA members' drawings. The three co-authors described drawings to the selected cartoonist. She drafted prototypes of the main characters: a nana, dressed in comfortable sweater, slacks, and house shoes; a daughter, appearing to be in her 20s or 30s, wearing a casual top, slacks, and flats; and the daughter's husband, in a short-sleeved tee-shirt, slacks, and sandals.

The three characters had brown skin color and dark eyes consistent with Mexican heritage, and the daughter and son-in-law had dark hair and eyebrows. The nana's hair was a greyed shading, and she was shorter than the younger characters (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

A volunteer who had written the previous telenovela script (Crist et al., 2015) drafted a script for the graphic novela. The script contained the story of a nana and her falls and safety issues, the trials encountered by caregiving family members in attempting to help, and a discussion between the caregiver and her spouse about the need for more assistance to remain at home (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 about here.]

ENCASA members who were in attendance gave input on how the early versions of characters appeared and how the script was drafted. This input was imparted to the artist. She then drafted a 9-page graphic novela, using the draft script.

Evaluation of the Prototype

Qualitative description (QD) was used for this inquiry. QD methodology is an appropriate qualitative research approach when the research aim calls for describing a perspective or experience (Sandelowski, 2010). Unlike other common methodologies, e.g., phenomenology or grounded theory, researchers use QD when description with minimal interpretation is required. QD was an appropriate methodology because of the lack of current knowledge about use of graphic novelas within this specific context, i.e., of the use of LTSS by Mexican American caregiving families.

Sample

A convenience sample, a small homogeneous group, was used. All members of ENCASA were invited to participate in a formal focus group to discuss their reactions to the graphic novela. The invitation was imparted at the August meeting and also through email to the entire membership (N=20). Ten members volunteered to be in the focus group.

Human Subjects Protection

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained through the university's Human Subjects board. IRB-approved consent forms were distributed by email before the focus group to ENCASA members. Consent forms were returned by email (N=1) or signed at the meeting before the start of the formal focus group (N=9). A $10 gift card for a local coffee stand was provided to each participant at the end of the meeting to thank them for their participation.

Data Collection: Focus Group

The investigators, i.e., the principal investigator (PI; the first author), the Co-I, and the eighth co-author chose the focus group method of data collection (Krueger & Casey, 2014) to access desired feedback from the MA community. A one-time focus group, versus other types of interview methods (e.g., individual interviews), was expected to be more efficient in accessing culturally based opinions and take less time for this short (1-year) funded study. The format of focus groups provides an opportunity for participants to respond and elaborate on other participants' previous comments, and for researchers to elicit clarification, of any issues about a topic (Krueger & Casey). Three of the co-authors had observed that members' previous interactions during ENCASA meetings had been easily congenial yet frank.

Krueger and Casey's (2014) practical guide was used in developing interview questions, taking notes and recording during the group. Two weeks before the meeting, the nine cartoon pages were emailed to members; hard copies were also provided to each participant at the

meeting. The focus group was convened at a specially called ENCASA meeting in October 2019 for members to review and give their input on the graphic novela. The focus group was conducted at one of the city/county public library meeting rooms where ENCASA had met previously. The PI, who was located in another state, led the focus group, via "Zoom," an electronic meeting format appearing on a laptop screen (Zoom Video Communications, 2020). The Co-I co-facilitated in person. Microphones were placed around the large table. The focus group was tape recorded and transcribed via Zoom. Confidentiality was protected via the University's Zoom agreement.

The focus group was conducted like an informal conversation. The following questions were asked during the focus group:

> *What were your thoughts when you looked at the graphic novela? Did the characters ring true? Why or why not? Was the plot appropriate? How or what could be more effective? Was the design pleasing for an older adult and caregiver audience? Was it appropriately presented?*

Prompts were used as needed to request additional in-depth explanations or clarifications (e.g., "*Would you say more? When you said, ___, did you mean, ___, ___, or something else? What do the rest of you think about that? Comments? Suggestions?")* All members were invited and encouraged in a non-structured, open manner to share their opinions. All members participated by discussing each question at a natural pace for 1.5 hour.

Data Analysis

Results from the focus group were compiled and analyzed by the PI and Co-I using content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). They independently proposed codes, short names for similar comments stated by participants, and independently abstracted codes into meaningful units called

themes. Themes not only represented patterns of codes but also helped explain content of the narratives (Miles et al., 2014). They also identified excerpts, or quotes, which illustrated themes and then compared codes, themes, and excerpts.

Trustworthiness of Data

To assure trustworthiness of findings, the PI and Co-I independently coded the transcript of the focus group to meet credibility (verification of findings from diverse viewpoints) and dependability (consistency of findings) criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as described. When the PI and Co-I compared themes, names of codes and themes did not have to use the exact same words but represent the same meanings. Themes had a 100% match. The themes with illustrating excerpts were distributed to the co-authors via email. Co-authors were interested parties who had attended the focus group and/or were faculty or local community experts in cultural diversity, qualitative research, graphic art, and/or theoretical foundations of research. All co-authors agreed on the themes and excerpts. Co-authors also added more explications of findings to support existing themes, either by email or during drafting of the manuscript.

Confirmability was assured through "member checks" with the co-authors who had also attended, verifying the themes. Themes were also shared with and verified by the entire ENCASA members at the subsequent February 2020 meeting. Transferability (application to similar groups within similar contexts) and practical implications (Packer & Addison, 1989) were also assured through discussion of findings with members of the larger ENCASA group at the same meeting. Using reflexivity (Jootun et al., 2009), the Co-I, ENCASA's founder and facilitator, became aware she was a proponent of the graphic novela medium as well as enjoyed a friendly relationship with the ENCASA members. She remained cognizant that these perspectives could mask her recognizing negative feedback as well as not listening carefully to

members' critiques. The fact that the PI who facilitated the focus group as well as some of the ENCASA members were less familiar with the subject matter also helped assure more objective trustworthiness of findings.

Findings

This focus group had a sample size of ten. Half of the ten participants (N=5) had previously participated in the April and August meetings. Participants were women, seven of ten Latina (five of Mexican descent, two of Central American descent). Most (eight of ten) represented community agencies that mainly served caregivers in predominantly MA neighborhoods; two were students. Two participants had been ENCASA members for at least 18 years. All participants were English speaking. The focus group participants' ages were not collected; however, participants ranged from young to older adults. Participants' comments revealed that both family caregiver and older adult social roles were represented.

Three themes emerged from the focus group discussion. The themes were Positive Reactions, Recommendations for Improvement, and Use of and Where to Distribute Copies.

Positive Reactions

Participants' reactions to the graphic novela were primarily positive. One participant who had attended previous meetings when the graphic novela had been planned exclaimed, as if pleasantly surprised, *"This turned out much better than I thought!"* This comment was not pursued; it was not known what the participant had expected. Participants discussed the format, script, and drawings of the draft, including images and terminology. Overall, participants reported they found the graphic novela format appealing. They reported they felt the characters and script were realistic representations of MA families. When prompted, they disagreed with the Co-I that the nana's hair in the stylized coloration (a mauve-gray) was not the right color to

depict gray hair. Participants agreed that the Nana character should not be depicted as too old, because MA families start young, and grandmothers could be in their 40s or 50s. The script was validated, with a few recommendations.

Recommendations for Improvement

Recommendations for improvement included several changes in the story line. A participant suggested that the daughter's husband agreed too quickly to considering available LTSS, in a way that implied he wanted her to not live with them anymore. Others suggested was that the older adult be included in the discussion between the caregivers to better depict a family conference. Members suggested more of an extended family discussion, rather than just between the daughter, her husband, and the nana. This would mean adding the nana, and children and siblings of both the nana and the daughter. Participants also suggested using dichos as part of the script (e.g., *m'hija:* my daughter or *"Querida";* fond nickname: "dear"). Another participant suggested using the more typical term "Mom" when the daughter was addressing the older adult. Participants pointed out that the younger woman depicted in the graphic novela was a daughter, yet the older adult was called a grandmother ('Nana'). This was a reason to add children to the story.

Participants suggested modifying the appearance of the characters. For example, although some members suggested that the older adult's affect should be more alert and with a more vibrant stance, others said the nana did not appear too old or frail. One participant stated, *"The daughter's husband looks like he's in a bad mood."* She suggested lightening his dark, furrowed eyebrows. Other members thought that the daughter's husband looked too "laid back" in his posture during his conversation with the daughter. A suggestion was to have him appear more animated so that he would look more engaged.

Participants commented on the appearance of the script. They recommended that the font of the characters' words should be larger for easier reading. Other members noted a few spelling errors. Participants also identified some errors and inconsistencies by the artist, e.g., the bruise on the nana's arm was missing on one page. Some members suggested resources for finding other graphic artists for future graphic novels.

Use of and Where to Distribute Copies

Participants initiated suggestions about distributing the graphic novela to healthcare providers' offices and clinic systems. Participants suggested specific contact names of local providers whose clientele were primarily MA individuals. Participants envisioned providers presenting the graphic novela to patients and their family caregivers to generate discussions about using LTSS. Participants also recommended marketing the graphic novela in other locations, anticipating that as caregivers and/or older adults picked up and read the engaging graphic novelas, discussions within families and/or with providers would be encouraged. Participants suggested contacting local Area Agencies on Aging and senior centers. Members also suggested disseminating the graphic novelas via Facebook and other social media, reiterating the purpose of opening communication about the topic of using LTSS to support the caregiving family.

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Discussion

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Findings supported previous positive reactions to graphic novelas in general in the literature. Research has shown positive results from using graphic novelas for educating MA and other minorities—designed to change attitudes about, health screening and management of illness (Grigsby et al., 2017; Reyes-Rodríguez et al., 2016). This small study contributes new

knowledge that a graphic novela on using LTSS was found appropriate for MA caregiving families.

Practice, Public Health, and Academic Applications

Nurses and other health professionals should engage community partners like the ENCASA members in designing graphic novelas that guide families to identify and gain access to resources such as LTSS. The graphic novela was designed to provide a culturally familiar means to advocate for culturally informed behavioral change outcomes. Other CBPR-based graphic novela projects have been shown to be successful (Christy et al., 2019). Such CBPR projects are valuable ways to give voice to members of stakeholder communities, reflecting, acknowledging, respecting, and promoting cultural strengths.

In current public health and academic settings, graphic novelas should be employed to address urgent sources of disparities, such as vaccination hesitancy by diverse populations (Rosenbaum, 2021). The current authors plan to collaborate with the local college of public health to test a revised version of this intervention using the focus group's recommendations. As well, the authors have invited current doctoral students to consider testing the prototype for their quality improvement projects or dissertations to create similar graphic novelas to promote use of services by MA adults, e.g., behavioral health services. Graphic novelas have been shown to successfully improve knowledge about, and decrease fear of, stigma for depression treatment for Latinx individuals (Cabassa et al., 2015).

The graphic novela could be a key part of a decisional support aid displaying different types of services available. Hard copies of the graphic novela, in Spanish and English, could be made available to patients and their family caregivers strategically placed in waiting rooms at community clinics located in highly populated MA areas or other locations, e.g., public libraries.

This intervention could be used by social workers or nursing case managers to help promote use of appropriate LTSS resources for MA families. The graphic novela medium could be designed in ways known to be appealing and effective with other unique groups. Readers are challenged to brainstorm applications of the narrative pedagogy theoretical framework and graphic novela intervention for health promotion situations in their own diverse practice and academic contexts. Readers are cautioned to engage local stakeholder partners to help tailor graphic novelas with applicable and current scripting, visuals, terminology, and style.

Research Implications

Although research has already been conducted about using graphic novelas to educate and change behavior, the process of developing this graphic novela models effective collaboration with community partners. Involvement of members of the MA community occurred in all aspects of the study: in the design of the prototype of the "nana" cartoon character, participation in the development of the dialogue of the plot, and during the focus group discussion about the final product. Although other types of graphic novelas used with other ethno-cultural groups have been shown to be effective, the authors strongly agree with proponents of accessing cultural and local language nuances as well as experiences with use of graphic novelas before assuming that content and pictures transfer from one homogeneous group to another (Cohn, 2020).

The current graphic novela will be refined and tested again through subsequent ENCASA meetings. The format and the drawings will inform next versions in future grant proposals. A refined graphic novela as well as distribution suggestions will then be used in future studies with larger, more diversely attended focus groups. Subsequent effectiveness studies will provide evidence whether using a graphic novela intervention with MA caregiving families results in

hypothesized outcomes, e.g., increased knowledge and confidence in LTSS, increased use of LTSS, prevention of falls, reduced emergency room visits and hospitalizations, and averted caregiving crises. Similar predictors and outcomes were the premise of the team's randomized control trial testing a telenovela that modeled using LTSS, presented to hospitalized MA older adults and their caregivers, with positive results (Crist et al., 2015).

Graphic novelas could be distributed on social media (e.g., Facebook). Frequencies of the electronic version of the graphic novela being accessed and viewed in its entirety could be tabulated (Houk & Thornhill, 2013). Collecting data about frequency of viewing the graphic novela in both venues (i.e., hard copy in the waiting room or electronic version) would be useful to discern best practice for disseminating the graphic novelas.

Limitations

This small study consisted of only one focus group. The focus group's participants totaled ten. The small sample size is a limitation. Future research should include larger, more diverse groups to develop and test responses to the graphic novela. Also, some ENCASA members who originally contributed to the graphic novela design, i.e., 5 of the 10 focus group participants, also later participated in the focus group. Participants including members of the research team who were also members of ENCASA, having originally helped design the graphic novela, could have positively biased participants' reactions. It is also possible that that research team members of ENCASA may have also contributed to the ability of the research team to successfully complete this study within the 1 year time frame.

It should be noted that the graphics were drawn in a realistic style, more resembling a fotonovela rather than a graphic novela presentation. Future work should test out realistic vs. more fanciful depictions of the characters.

All participants were English speaking and most were employed by community organizations, indicating a high level of acculturation, which could have influenced participants' reactions, possibly positively biased. The participants resided in geographic areas of a mid-sized urban city in southern Arizona in census tracts populated primarily by an MA population. There was no attempt to measure acculturation in the study. Although a more diverse sample with varied levels of acculturation would be ideal, that was not possible with the small sample for the one focus group. However, there were no discernable ethno-cultural differences between the MA, Central American, and non-Latinx white participants in terms of findings; and the small focus group sample size did not methodologically warrant speculating on inferred intracultural interpretation (Raulston, 2019). A future goal is to translate the graphic novela into Spanish for broader dissemination, and include acculturation measurement. All participants were women as was representative of the current makeup of the ENCASA group membership. Future focus groups and intervention effectiveness studies should include attention to recruitment of men as well as women.

Conclusion

After further testing, clinicians may be able to successfully use the graphic novela's light-hearted comic approach to a serious subject. Graphic novelas provide a non-confrontational format for informing families about community services, modeling how families may address the sensitive topic of utilizing LTSS, and guiding families on how to access services. Findings indicate that the design, size, and convenience of graphic novelas would make them suitable for distribution in a range of ways and settings. Healthcare professionals and public policy officials may consider utilizing the graphic novela as a visually and culturally appropriate tool for

communicating important messages, in an appealing and non-threatening form, to diverse older

adults and their caregivers. Partnering with stakeholders is essential for creating new solutions.

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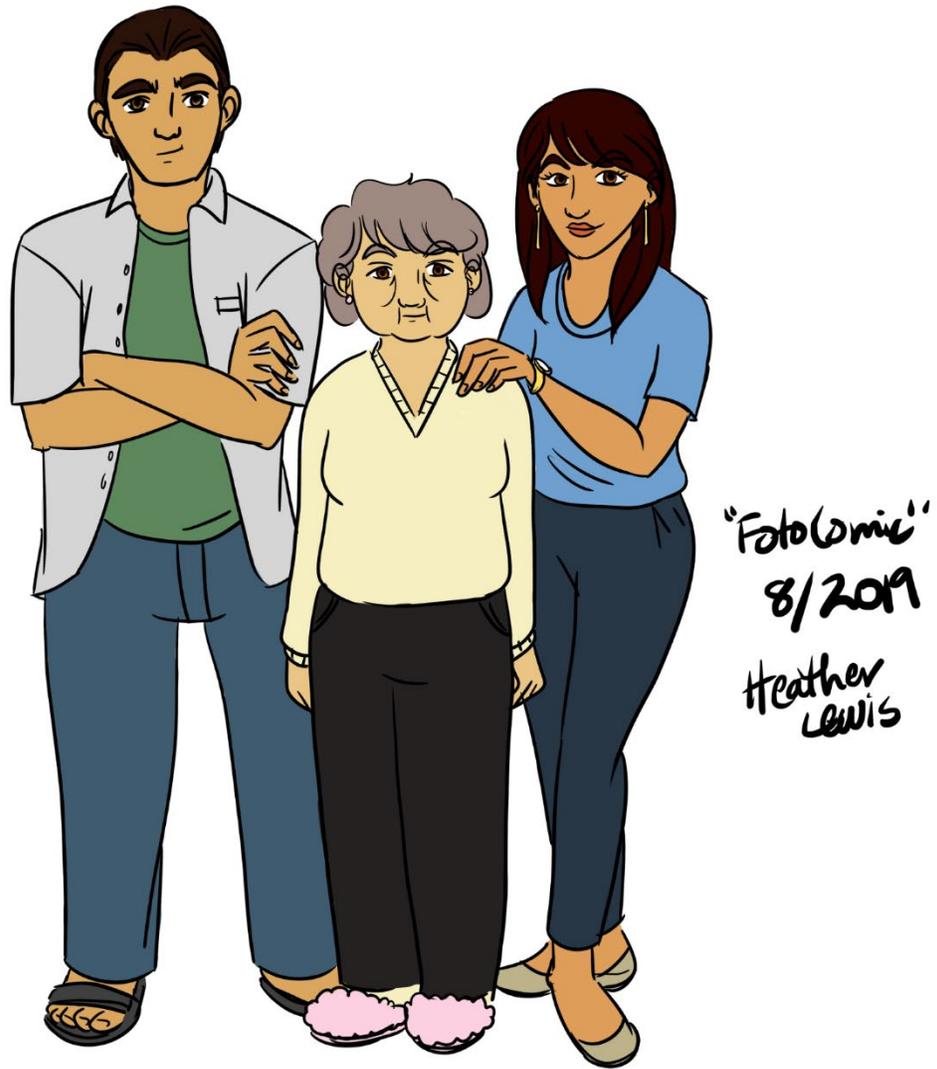Associate Professor Emerita, College of Nursing, The University of Arizona

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Figure 1: Group of Characters

Figure 2: Family Conversation

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