EXPLORING COMMUNITY-ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS IN HIV-RELATED RESEARCH: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Introduction

Over the years, community involvement in HIV-related health and social science research has increased, enhancing community-academic partnerships. These collaborations are becoming more commonplace in the HIV sector and have been highly appreciated. At the same time, they are often criticized due to a lack of clear definition and implementation criteria.

Several terms have been used to describe community participation in HIV-related research across a wide variety of settings. These approaches are often referred to as:

► Community-based participatory research
► Community-based research
► Participatory action research
► Community collaborative research, or
► Action research

Objective

To review the benefits and challenges of community-academic partnerships specific to HIV-related research as identified in the literature.

Methods

► A systematic search of English language articles in PubMed to December 2012 was conducted
► Websites of international and community organizations and research institutes were examined
► Reference lists of included articles were consulted

Included publications focused on HIV/AIDS, reproductive health or sexually transmitted infections and had explicit definitions of community-based research or provided descriptions of methodologies with community components.

► Articles were assessed and extracted data were independently verified by a second reviewer
► Qualitative data were analysed using MaxQDA
► Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics
► Feedback from community representatives was incorporated

Results

Searches yielded 246 references of which 159 (154 primary studies and five review articles) met inclusion criteria. Included studies used:

► Qualitative (51%)
► Quantitative (8%), or
► Mixed methods (37%)

The most commonly identified benefit of community-academic partnerships in HIV-related research was improved quality and relevance of research. Other identified benefits of community-academic partnerships were: building trust between researchers and community and community empowerment.

The most commonly identified challenge of community-academic partnerships in HIV-related research was resource-intensity. Other identified challenges were: community diversity making research more complex or hindering research processes, and conflicting priorities of researchers and community members.

Interestingly, while the most commonly identified benefit was improved quality of the research, a significant number of studies also found that community-academic partnerships decreased the quality as a result of insufficient training, minimal support, and community members’ lack of professional experience and expertise.

Benefits and challenges of community-academic partnerships in HIV-related research

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<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
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<td>Improved quality and relevance of research: Community involvement may facilitate HIV research processes and ensure better dissemination of results to community while providing academics with insider knowledge of the target community to better shape research processes (e.g. recruitment) and tools (e.g. questionnaires).</td>
<td>Complexity of research processes: Community often includes a great diversity of individuals and organizations, which may lead to differences of opinion. These discordant views may complicate the research process making it increasingly complex.</td>
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<td>Building trust between researchers and community: Cooperation between communities and academia may enhance trust between and within groups and help overcome preconceptions about HIV-related research while facilitating research processes (e.g. community representatives encourage community members to participate in a study; peer researchers enable discussions of sensitive subjects).</td>
<td>Community empowerment: Community members who play active roles in study design, interpretation and dissemination may feel a sense of belonging in the research process and control over their lives which allows them to better advocate for their peers while raising awareness and concerns to influential advocates.</td>
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Conclusions

► While community participation in HIV-related research can increase the quality and relevance of research, it may require more time and resources
► Careful consideration of the challenges of community-academic partnerships is required when designing, implementing and interpreting results of HIV-related research projects to allow for realistic expectations on both sides
► A clear framework for community-academic partnerships could address potential concerns about research quality