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The Process of Research in International Settings: From Risk Assessment to Program Development and Intervention

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ABSTRACT *Although there are many challenges, international HIV prevention research and program evaluation are critical to advances in the health and welfare of people around the globe. While there is an increasing amount of literature describing outcomes of international prevention programs, there is sparse information regarding the process of developing and implementing international research. This brief report describes key elements in the development of collaborative international prevention research and programmatic implementation.*

KEYWORDS *HIV, International research, Prevention programs.*

INTRODUCTION

Although collaborative international research historically has been recognized as a need and an opportunity, it has now become a viable and more utilized option for effective HIV risk behavior prevention and intervention programs.^{1,2} The Internet and improved global access have diminished the importance of geographical proximity and have made international collaborative research more feasible. As such, studies disseminating international prevention and intervention research are now more widely available in the scientific literature. Thus, the identification and utilization of effective elements in the implementation of international research is becoming of importance. The significance of adapting the process of research methodologies or models to promote collaborative international research has become apparent in our international research experiences. Our collaborative group has been involved in a number of international studies for the prevention of high-risk HIV behaviors in youth. We have found significant capacity differences in these settings (North America, Europe, Caribbean, Australia, and South Africa) of both perceived need and local expertise. Thus, depending upon the request of the country/region, different levels of collaboration were established. As a result of the implementation of these studies and our collaboration with a variety of both United States and other international governments and institutions, we have identified some key elements that have been important in the process of collaborative international HIV prevention/intervention research.

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COLLABORATIVE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PROCESS

There has been a dramatic increase in community-based approaches that provide models and intervention strategies that can be useful to effectively implementing HIV risk reduction research in international settings. The concept of community capacity as it “examines the nature and extent of social relationships that exist within communities and the presence of community factors that may affect the ability of communities to mobilize to address systematic problems” (p. 195)³ provides a guiding framework that is applicable to international settings. The basic principles of community-based participatory research such as the process of gaining entry into the community and developing and sustaining a mutual collaboration are a useful model for international research.⁴ Thus, this paper does not propose a new model, but rather illustrates the process of the application of the concepts of community-based participatory research in the framework of the capacity of a community for engaging in the international research process.

Initiating International Research: Choosing or Responding to the Setting

Previous experience in the international research setting or a perceived need for a particular expertise typically initiates research collaboration. Importantly, most projects succeed best when the local culture perceives a need and initiates the request for collaboration. There is also a possibility for good outcomes on projects that are initiated by the outside researchers; however, in these instances the “intent” of the researchers is often questioned throughout the process. The first contact with the local community is critical to the successful implementation of the research project. The perceived intentions of the outside researchers will affect both if and how the project will proceed. If the local culture believes that the collaboration is primarily for the career benefit of the researchers and/or their representative institution, this impression can hinder or prevent a potentially important project which could benefit both the local community and the researcher.

Identification of the Various National and Community Stake Holders

The success of a research process is determined by the nature of the relationship between the outside and local collaborators. An important preliminary task of working in an international setting is to identify local collaborators and investigators and their capacity to be directly or indirectly involved with some aspect of the research process. Among these local collaborators should be individuals who represent the aspects of the community the research is intended to impact. This representation helps to hold the government/nongovernmental organizations sponsoring the research accountable for a successful implementation of the project. While developing relationships and aligning with current politics can promote a program, the political climate in many countries is often in constant flux, with changes in leadership of key collaborative institutions. Thus, it is beneficial to have key nonpolitical community collaborators as identified partners. Appointing an advisory board with governmental and nongovernmental representation can facilitate this. This board can be vital to the successful implementation of the program, and its influence can integrate the research program into community practices to foster long-term sustainability.

Additionally, it is imperative to designate a local coprincipal investigator(s). Often this may be the person who initiated the contact or an appointed individual

in the local institution. It is politically important to integrate into the study those who initiated contact while at the same time steering local leadership for the project to an individual with the skill capacity that best matches the needs of the study. It is also important to assess skill sets and resources or expertise available locally for the program. Although specific expertise may at times not be available, it is likely that with training, local community capacity can be increased and utilized in the study. In some regions, the outside investigators' role may be confined to the design and analysis, whereas the local region has the expertise and resources to implement the assessment/program. The more local institutions are involved, the higher the likelihood of sustainability for the program. In sum, international local coinvestigators provide necessary input to the design and implementation of the study; however, their value added involvement promotes feasibility and access to the community.

Important Preimplementation Agreements for Program Development

One of the first discussions in any project should clarify funding sources and budget. This discussion should spell out what resources are available from local entities, which can be attained by the outside researchers, thereby defining the breadth and scope of the study, and what expectations there may be for sustainability. The model of the program, the timeline, and identification of expected outcomes also need to be discussed in the context of the identified need and the resources available. In addition to the funding, level of intervention and involvement should be determined. In regions where needs assessment data are not available, this may be the first level of intervention.² The needs assessment provides focus to the HIV intervention and can often project which components of a model will be most essential. The needs assessment should be theoretically based and may be an important foundation for the development of a model-driven intervention program into the targeted community. A needs assessment can help to build the collaborative relationship between investigator and community that is necessary to initiate a successful intervention. In other studies, the research involves moving from needs assessment to the actual intervention.

A clear explanation of the need for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) is vital as some cultures may see the process as offensive if it is not explained in a manner which elucidates concern for human welfare as opposed to control. An issue that often requires negotiation in international work is that of informed consent.⁵ What constitutes consent and whether active or passive consent is a better reflection of the local culture can differ between the local culture and the outside IRB. Further, the definition of "minor" varies between cultures. Thus, finding a balance between IRB procedure and local protocol is vital so that it does not hinder the research project. Another important concept is that of confidentiality. For instance, despite the availability of local expertise, outside investigators may best implement an HIV risk reduction project when confidentiality is a concern in a small community.⁶ "Concern for the participants" will smooth the process of determining how and who will implement the program and will open the door for important discussions of IRBs. Additionally, some countries do not have a similar IRB entity/process, and it may be important for them to develop this process, particularly to participate as a part of an National Institutes of Health funded grant.

Although the international local coinvestigators facilitate and ensure cultural competence for the program, it may be very useful to have the local collaborators

provide specific training to the outside researchers regarding the region's needs, culture, methodologies, and available expertise. It is important to be open to this training rather than assume that collaboration in and of itself constitutes cultural competence. This is essential because no culture is monolithic and understanding within culture similarities and differences can be complex and require a collaborative relationship between the outside and local researchers.⁷

Many different strategies can be employed before the initiation of a program to attain the community acceptance necessary to make the program's implementation successful. A major strategy involves the use of focus groups with targeted populations such as parents, teachers, and students so that youth prevention programs can develop the concept of the community's voice in the development of the program. Meetings with representative government agencies such as the Ministry of Health or Education can provide political support. In one of the regions we have worked, the Health Department organized a local conference to elucidate the issue to local professionals before implementation of the program. In some regions, we have made presentations to various faith-based organizations to reach a broader representation of the lay and professional community. Utilizing the media is also a strategy that may be useful. The media can develop community awareness of the high-risk behaviors in the community and emphasize the need for the program. It is important, however, that agreements are made with the media such that they promote the program but do not do so in such a way that violates the integrity or methodology of the program.

Application, Interpretation, and Dissemination of Research in International Settings

The current scientific literature provides a wide variety of HIV risk reduction models available to the researcher. It is understood that theoretical models or components are an essential part of a good research design.^{8,9} It is important, however, to consider that the majority of these models have been developed and tested in North America, thus reflecting efficacy from this vantage point. Utilizing these programs in the broader international setting requires validation and more than just language translation. Skilled researchers and concerned professionals wishing to make a difference globally sometimes rush to intervention and hastily apply programs, even evidenced based ones, which can result in a higher potential for stressed international relationships or unsuccessful outcomes. Even the community-based participatory research process, while offering a useful model, must be evaluated for its utility within the culture. For intervention models to be successful, they must be considered and revised within the context of a country's local community culture. This can only happen within the context of local collaborators who can navigate their culture and identify what structural and cultural barriers occur that may impede the research project.

An example of the application of community-based participatory research in international settings includes data interpretation. Although the data analysis is often best done as a shared process, the "meaning making" of those results to the community becomes more acceptable and relevant when offered by the community whence the data came.¹⁰ For example, our needs assessment survey in Eastern Europe indicated that in addition to gender differences in the prevalence and frequency of risk behaviors, notable gender differences were observed in the presence and strength of associations among the various behavioral model components. Specifically, consistent with expressed cultural norms, sexual risk behavior intentions

for males were driven primarily by personal attitudes, whereas peer and parent perceived norms were the driving force for the personal attitudes for females.¹¹ Research has demonstrated that without the context of values from the local culture there can be significant issues of validity.¹² When needs assessment data interpretations are done by community members themselves, there is more of an assurance that the intervention program based on that data will be more culturally specific and relevant as well as more effective. Further, once community ownership occurs, sustainability or further research becomes not only feasible but is also welcomed.

One definitely important element at the onset of international research is a discussion about the dissemination of the results. This should include a dialogue of what entities can receive the data and reports created by the studies. Also important are agreements regarding professional presentations and publications. Some regions may allow dissemination only if it refers to a broader geographical region, whereas others may permit specific identification. The process of presentation or publication approval as well as authorship concerns or requirements should be delineated. It is most constructive when international collaborators are coauthors for both presentations and publications, as this promotes a sense of a collaborative research community and also ensures the most accurate representation of the data.

CARIBBEAN INTERVENTION: AN EXAMPLE OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT TO INTERVENTION

The following is an example of international research collaboration with the implementation of a youth risk behavior needs assessment conducted in one of our Caribbean studies and the move toward intervention. The collaboration with St. Maarten began with a request to assist in identifying the prevalence of youth risk behavior in a broader HIV/AIDS prevention effort. To initiate awareness of need to the community and attain support for the needs assessment project, a World AIDS Day Conference was held, and members of our research team and local collaborators presented papers at this conference. The media were engaged by local collaborators to promote the need for this research and has continued to be part of this process. Meetings with school staff and officials were held, and local support for the needs assessment was attained by many groups including the Ministers of Health and Education, Health Department, Department of Education, women's advocacy, schools, and faith community.

Owing to the fact that this is a small community and the local collaborators' desire for honesty based on anonymity, the US based researchers conducted the needs assessment. Another valuable local resource included the American medical school on the island that, by invitation of the local collaborators, assisted in the data collection. An Advisory Board was developed to assist in the methodology for dissemination of results from the needs assessment and the strategies necessary to move this on toward HIV prevention/intervention efforts on the island. As a result of the recommendations of the Advisory Board, focus groups were put into place to assist in interpretation of the data from the needs assessment and to provide input on strategies for prevention/intervention programs. Focus groups included members from the Education Department, faith community representatives, nongovernmental organizations/treatment groups, afterschool programs, labor unions, government and media. A comprehensive report was created and provided to all identified local collaborators. Further dissemination to the public included presentations at all the secondary school parent-teacher meetings, some churches and school staff meetings.

A summary version of the results was developed and published and provided to the community via the Health Department. As a result of this research process, several entities have implemented pilot programs, including collaborators at Emory University. Currently, our research group is working with the local drug treatment providers and the University of Miami on a HIV/AIDS risk prevention program. In addition, we are working with the departments of education and health and the nongovernmental organizations of St. Maarten to develop a strategy for programmatic interventions for youth, based on the needs identified in the needs assessment and focus groups. The leadership of the international and local investigators and the truly collaborative nature of the entire research group have made the movement from needs assessment to program development and HIV intervention possible and successful.

CONCLUSION

International collaborative research is both challenging and rewarding. Most importantly, it is feasible with great potential for success if the process is developed within the context of understanding community capacity and applying that understanding to community-based participatory research in the international setting. Local/community co-ownership is vital to initiation, implementation, and policy/program impact of study outcomes. Further, with appropriate national/local cultural input, widely used western theories can demonstrate applicability across cultures. However, although western theories demonstrate overall utility, the interpretation of “meaning” and applicability of results by the collaborators in the international regions are imperative to intervention efficacy and program sustainability. Importantly, for international research to be efficacious, it requires that the outside researcher emphasize and be prepared for a long-term commitment, allowing for optimal impact on the needs of the target community.

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