EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Improving Research-Based Practice through Qualitative Inquiry: A Community-Based Study of Minority Health Care

Dr. Wayne A. Babchuk and Lesa L. Brand

Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine how public health workers can better utilize research to improve practice in the area of minority health care. Employing a collaborative, community-based qualitative methodology, researchers interviewed 13 community health workers utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol. Data analysis involved multi-stage, team-based coding into increasingly higher analytical levels from codes to categories, and ultimately into five emergent and recurring themes. Data were triangulated through on-going researcher collaboration, team meetings, critical dialogue, memoing, member checking, and peer review.

Findings and Themes

Codes and categories were grouped into three sections labeled: “Current Responsibilities”, “Current Use of Research”, and “Challenges and Suggestions for Improving Research-to-Practice.” These aligned with participant responses to interview questions designed to answer the central research question (i.e., How can public health workers better utilize research to improve practice in the area of minority health care?). Building of these three clusters of categories, five overarching themes emerged during data analysis: (1) “Fighting for Social Justice,” (2) Improving Minority Data, (3) Priority Setting and Applicability of Research, (4) Collaboration, and (5) Research Accessibility.

The “in vivo” code, “Fighting for Social Justice” developed into an overarching theme referring to the collective opinion of our participants that they felt passionately about delivering equitable and quality care to all people served by their agencies. This theme finds broad support in related literature. A shared frustration among participants in this study involved the inadequacy and inaccuracy of data as it relates to minority populations, a theme we titled Improving Minority Data. Participants offered testimonials and real world examples of this problem faced on an on-going basis, and provided specific suggestions regarding how these data could be improved. Expressed in the theme, Priority Setting and Applicability of Research, participants underscored the need for indigenous knowledge that is local and context-specific, often finding it problematic to translate research findings to their own community settings with positive results. Participants believed there is urgency for research that develops from community concerns and has at its core localized delivery systems that are culturally sensitive and appropriate. Another central and overarching theme was the need for increased Collaboration between the research community and public health practitioners to more effectively achieve mutually shared goals. These partnerships were deemed critical for advancing practice through research. The theme Research Accessibility encompassed both the language of academic research and physical access to pertinent studies. Our participants felt it incumbent upon researchers to communicate results of relevant, local research in a manner accessible to community health workers that could be translated into effective practice.

Conclusions and Implications

These five themes encapsulated participant responses cutting across the data and were consonant with the broader, nationally-based research literature addressing this topic. Initially bracketing this literature until after data collection and analysis were well under way, we were struck with how similar our participants’ views reflected and extended key findings conducted among previous researchers investigating the potential effectiveness of research for informing practice to achieve the overarching goal of reducing
disparities in minority health care. Our research underscored on a local and regional level shared concerns and proposed solutions that bind community health workers and researchers together both epistemologically and in practice.

Based on our findings and this broader research literature, we recommend a model of local collaboration between formal research/educational institutions and community health agencies. Incorporating the highly touted Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach, we suggest an intensive recursive model of research and communication. The overarching thrust of the proposed model aligns with the key principles of CBPR, which in essence strives to equalize power relationships between research and practice entities and emphasizes shared information and collaborative, equitable involvement of all partners in all phases of research. To maximize effectiveness, local research and/or educational institutions should base minority health research on priorities set at the local level as conveyed to them through proximal community health agencies. Using local priority-setting to situate research addresses the direct applicability of research, an aspect that was missing for our participants. Additionally, institutions that conduct or organize the research driven by local priorities must make the results of their research consumable for community health agencies, providing abbreviated versions in lay terms to local practices.

Community Based Participatory Research

Community Health Entities
(Governmental and Non-Governmental)

Communicate Research Priorities
Use Priorities to Design Research
Provide Participants for Research
Communicate at all stages of Research
Produce Academic Report
Produce Condensed Report for CH Agencies

Research &/or Educational Institutions

Collaboration and Communication

Proposed Model for CBPR to Facilitate Research to Practice

In our proposed model, priorities communicated by community health agencies to the research entities will be developed into research projects. Through an established communication network between these bodies, the agencies will provide participants for studies and the researchers will communicate back to agencies at all stages of research projects. When possible, researchers representing both research institutions and community-based practice settings will share the processes and results of research efforts for the benefit of all parties. At the conclusion of CBPR community health and minority health projects, these researchers will develop both an academic report and a condensed version of the research study for participating and otherwise affected agencies. Through this collaborative network, the agency and research bodies will work together to develop culturally sensitive tools and promotions for community health projects. Research developed collaboratively can then be used to monitor the effectiveness of programs that result from this partnership. Only through collaboration, communication, and commitment at all levels can our mutual goal of reducing minority health disparities be met.