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Perspectives of Community Partners and Researchers about Factors Impacting Coalition Functioning Over Time

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Abstract

This study explores organizational and contextual factors impacting coalition functioning across 15 community-researcher coalitions. A mixed methods approach was administered across three time points to assess factors associated with coalition development. Results indicate benefits and barriers to members' participation; importance of a clear vision, mission and goals; clear member roles; and impact of historical collaborative efforts. Current findings specified factors in three primary areas that influenced coalition development and sustainability: relationships, infrastructure and processes, and context/environment.

Keywords

coalitions; HIV; research; community; youth; development; sustainability; functioning

Introduction

In order to most effectively meet the complex health needs of diverse communities, community members, researchers and practitioners can work together to integrate their varied expertise regarding community-based intervention research and practice (IOM, 2002). One popular method of collaboration is the development of community-based coalitions (Wells, Ford, McClure, Holt & Ward, 2006). Coalition capacity is enhanced when the unique assets of multisector community members and researchers are brought together. Matching the community members' strengths, such as local cultural knowledge of communities and relationships with key community stakeholders, with researchers' technical expertise in defining research problems and using various methodologies for the systematic study of community interventions enriches the groups' ability to achieve coalition goals (Butterfoss, Goodman & Wandersman, 1993; Harper, Contreras, Bangi & Pedraza, 2004; Stokols, 2006).

While the collaboration of researchers and community partners in community-based coalitions can bring together the "best of both worlds," these stakeholders often possess different goals, incentives, and organizational cultures (Harper & Salina, 1999; Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, & Lewis, 2005). Unfortunately, ineffective community-researcher

coalitions can reinforce negative stereotypes of each other and fail to accomplish meaningful outcomes. One way to avoid such divisiveness is the creation of feedback loops to regularly assess coalition processes from the perspectives of all members involved (Harper, Neubauer, Bangi, & Francisco, 2008).

Previous research on coalition development has focused on factors related to effective coalition functioning and the importance of addressing organizational processes to develop and maintain high performance community-researcher coalitions that are able to achieve community-level outcomes (Francisco, Paine, & Fawcett, 1993; Kegler, Williams, Cassel, Santelli et al., 2005; Rog, Boback, Barton-Villagrana et al., 2004). Unfortunately, such studies typically have not represented the perspectives of both researchers and community partners involved in the coalitions, and have not adequately explored factors that affect participation and active involvement in the collaborative coalition. Incorporating the perspectives of both community partners and researchers allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the range of factors that influence coalition development and functioning over time. The current study presents the perspectives of community partners and researchers participating in community coalitions from an HIV prevention intervention research project entitled Connect to Protect[®] (C2P[®]).

Connect to Protect is a multi-site research project within the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions (ATN; Ziff, Harper, Chutuape et al., 2006). The ultimate aim of C2P is to reduce HIV/AIDS incidence and prevalence among marginalized youth in 15 urban sites in the U.S. and Puerto Rico by altering structural factors relevant to HIV risk. To achieve this goal, coalitions were formed to mobilize multiple community sectors. This article focuses on data from the first year of coalition development in order to capture the perspectives of diverse community and researcher members actively involved in the coalitions. Because coalitions are dynamic entities, understanding which organizational structure and functioning factors change or remain constant over time will help community interventionists develop effective coalitions. This study explores organizational and contextual factors impacting coalition functioning across 15 C2P community-researcher coalitions.

Methods

Quantitative and qualitative data from community partners and researchers were collected to assess coalition functioning. A concurrent mixed-model design with data triangulation was utilized, whereby qualitative and quantitative data sources were used to confirm or cross-validate findings (Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

A National Coordinating Center (NCC) coordinated and oversaw C2P programmatic activities, including data collection. Working Group Meetings (WGM) were held at regular intervals (approximately every 2 month) at each of the 15 sites in order for coalition members to complete project-related tasks. Data that were collected during and after each WGM were analyzed and fed back to each coalition to improve functioning. While there were a total of five WGMs held over the course of the first year, the current study focuses on WGM#1, 3, and 5.

Participants

Individuals completing the study measures included local C2P research staff members and community partners present at each of the WGMs. Research staff members included Principal Investigators, Site Coordinators, and Research Assistants. Community partners consisted predominantly of health, education and social service agency staff members (e.g.,

Executive Directors, Program Coordinators, Outreach Staff Members), community leaders, and representatives of the business sector. All those in attendance at the WGMs were invited to complete the quantitative measure. Some organizations chose to have one of multiple members present at the meeting complete the measure on behalf of the organization. Also, some individuals who were present at WGMs, but who did not identify themselves as coalition members, did not complete the quantitative measure. As a result the response rates for this measure may be artificially depressed. Following are the response rates for all three meetings: 75% ($n = 196$) for WGM#1, 82% ($n = 200$) for WGM#3 and 62% ($n = 119$) for WGM#5. Only those research staff members (i.e., Site Coordinators) and community members who played a substantial role in C2P-related activities completed the qualitative measure. For the qualitative measure, which was administered after the WGM, the number of participants for each time point was as follows: $n = 68$ for WGM#1, $n = 55$ for WGM#3, and $n = 44$ for WGM#5. Whenever possible the same the same participants were interviewed at all time points; however, there were instances when this was not possible such as when staff members' roles on the project changed. All data that were gathered were synthesized by members of the NCC and then

Procedures

Questionnaires were completed by participants at the conclusion of each WGM. Participants were given a unique identifier and feedback was provided in aggregate. Four NCC staff members conducted qualitative interviews approximately two weeks after a WGM took place either over the phone or face-to-face. If a participant did not consent to taping an interview, the interviewer took detailed notes during the interview. Following the transcription of all interviews, 25% of transcripts were randomly selected and reviewed for accuracy, with minimal errors identified and corrected. Only the interviews with participants from Puerto Rico were completed in Spanish and then translated to English by a bilingual NCC staff member.

Measures

Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory (WCFI; Mattessich, et al., 1992)—The WCFI was used to assess factors that influence the functioning and success of collaborations. The WCFI measures 20 factors that fall within 6 domains related to collaborative work: environment, membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, purpose, and resources. All 40 items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a higher degree of each particular factor. Although normative standards have not been determined for the WCFI, the Cronbach's alpha for our sample was .96 for the overall measure, and the alphas for the six domains were as follows: environment=.76, membership characteristics=.89, process and structure=.93, communication =.89, purpose=.83, and resources=.80. Mean scores for each factor formed the basis of data interpretation, along with cut-off scores developed by Mattessich et al. (1992) to determine areas of strength and concern for coalitions. Mean scores of 4.0 or higher for a factor were considered strengths of the collaborative, mean scores of 3.0 – 3.9 were of borderline concern, and mean scores of 2.9 or lower indicated a major concern. This measure was also translated into Spanish.

Community Researcher Partnership Interview (CRPI)—The CRPI, which was adapted from Fawcett and colleagues' (1995) Critical Event Interview, assessed the qualities and characteristics of coalitions. Content areas within the CRPI included coalition members' roles, benefits and challenges of collaborating with other organizations, key incidents and setbacks for the coalition, as well as factors required for successful implementation of the coalition's objectives. To assess organizational functioning, additional questions focused

specifically on perceptions of elements required for coalition development and functioning over time, as well as barriers to coalition development and functioning over time.

Analyses

Analyses involved both quantitative and qualitative data in a concurrent mixed model design, with priority placed on qualitative data (Creswell et al., 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Although quantitative data were used primarily to confirm and cross-validate the qualitative findings, discrepant quantitative results prompted further examination of qualitative transcripts to understand additional factors that may have explained such inconsistencies.

Three analysts trained in qualitative analysis read and reviewed the transcripts. Inductive and deductive analytic procedures were utilized in the qualitative analyses. The six domains of the WCFI quantitative measure served as initial a priori descriptive codes, and emergent codes were used to allow for concepts not present within the WCFI. Coded text was transferred to two analysis meta-matrices combining all analysts' data. Common themes that emerged across coalition members' responses were examined for changes across all three time points. Analysts also examined relationships among the themes noted in each domain, yielding a secondary level of deductive analysis beyond the framework created by the a priori WCFI codes. The analysts met regularly to share their findings and to have them reviewed by the other two analysts in order to ensure reliability of coding and to prevent individual biases. When analysts disagreed about coding, they discussed findings until they came to consensus.

Results

Qualitative and quantitative data are presented according to two over-arching thematic areas: a) facilitators of coalition functioning over time, and b) barriers to coalition functioning over time. These data represent both community partners' and researchers' perspectives. Four sub-themes emerged as specific facilitators of coalition functioning over time, including: a) developing group trust and cohesion, b) creating diverse coalition membership, c) developing a shared vision, and d) ensuring clarity of coalition purpose and goals. Four sub-themes emerged as specific barriers to coalition functioning over time: a) experiencing a lack of clarity over member roles and responsibilities, b) balancing power/resource dynamics between researchers and community partners, c) balancing coalition building and coalition pace, and d) experiencing HIV/AIDS-related stigma. Qualitative themes are presented together with related mean scores from factors on the WCFI to further illustrate specific points (names of WCFI factors are presented in italics). Representative quotes are shared to further illustrate thematic areas, and pseudonyms (i.e., City (1–15), Partner, Researcher) are used to protect the identity of participants. Proper names within quotes were deleted and replaced with an "X."

Facilitators of Coalition Functioning Over Time

Developing Group Trust and Cohesion—In both quantitative and qualitative responses, participants indicated that a foundation of trust among coalition members is necessary to working together successfully. Participants regularly commented on the personal qualities (e.g., trust, respect, commitment) of professional relationships and their willingness and capacity to work together. They also reported several factors that threatened the development of trust among members, such as the historical mistrust between researchers and community members as well as the competition among agencies. A researcher commented on challenges of working together when the necessary foundation among community partners was not established:

“Having agencies not trust each other so therefore it’s hard for them to work together because they don’t trust each other right off the bat.” (City 2 Researcher, WGM#1)

Building upon both personal experiences working in the coalition and regular feedback about coalition functioning, members were able to develop strategies to counteract these factors and foster trusting relationships among group members. Such strategies included a) developing consistent and varied communication paths among members that were inclusive of all members, b) employing collaborative action plans that encouraged people to start working together in cooperative rather than competitive ways, and c) having researchers demonstrate their strong commitment to “making good” on promises they made to community partners. Below are examples of how this foundation was set in place to create trust and cohesiveness.

“Following up with announcements, keeping up to date with what’s going on. Any changes with what’s happening, what is the same.” (City 10 Partner, WGM#3)

“Having organizations take more active role on agenda items and co-chair meeting facilitation.” (City 14 Partner, WGM#3)

Furthermore, the following statement by a community partner speaks to the benefit of consistent actions to alter negative perceptions of researchers and to build a trusting climate in the coalition:

“It’s always one sided meaning the researchers have their own language and they have their own agenda saying this is what we want, can we get it? And then they’re gone... But this project is different... I asked (X) for some information specific to the (X) area and it had to do with a study they did and she provided that on the spot and I could not have gotten that.” (City 2 Partner, WGM#1)

Evidence of the effectiveness of these efforts over time was supported by WCFI results for the factor *Informal Relationships and Communication Links*, which measures personal relationships that enhance group cohesion. This factor grew in intensity and by the 5th working group meeting, was considered a coalition strength (WGM#1=3.94, WGM#3=3.99, WGM#5=4.00). Participants also indicated at all three time points that collaborative members demonstrated *Open & Frequent Communication* by sharing necessary information and interacting regularly and honestly (WGM#1=4.21, WGM#3=4.14, and WGM #5=4.20).

Creating Diverse Coalition Membership—Participants indicated that creating a diverse coalition membership, including those outside HIV/AIDS-related fields, provided multiple benefits. Diverse membership provided a greater number of avenues through which the coalition could pursue and achieve its goals, including expanding knowledge about resources. In addition, the burn-out of a “dedicated few” coalition members doing the majority of the work could be prevented. Individual agencies also benefited from the ability to network with people from varied backgrounds and community sectors who possess an array of valued skills and expertise.

“I think that when you look at the nature of C2P, bringing together organizations that have different service focuses is what really makes it work. And the benefit of that is that everyone is kind of coming with different experiences to the table...you have people together talking, collaborating, that don’t normally do that.” (City 5 Researcher WGM#3)

Developing a Shared Vision—Reaching consensus on the coalition’s vision and mission was challenging at times. This was exacerbated when members emphasized the needs of their individual organization over the coalition’s vision and mission.

“Sometimes it’s difficult for our partners to let go of their agency hats and what they do for their agency. So to let go of that and to kind of focus on the community as a whole to kind of look at the bigger picture ... youth and HIV and prevention because... you need all parts to work together to be really successful.” (City 3 Researcher, WGM#3)

To address disparate visions among coalition members, coalition leaders took several steps to understand the perspectives of partnering agencies, and their unique priorities and interests. They also engaged in a process of illustrating how the vision of both individual organizations and the coalition fit together, and exploring and how each entity can serve the other. Quantitative responses spoke to the success of these efforts in that participants continually considered the group to have a *Shared Vision* (WGM#1=4.13, WGM#3=4.10, and WGM#5=4.20). Qualitative data echoed these sentiments:

“All agencies are on the same page, it moves forward the ability to provide services and for the needs of the target population.” (City 13 Partner WGM#5)

Ensuring Clarity of Coalition Purpose and Goals—By defining a clear purpose for the coalition’s existence and articulating the specific goals of the coalition, members knew what they were working to achieve through the development of clear strategies and action plans. In order to ensure clarity among all members, coalition leadership communicated the purpose and goals of C2P in an ongoing manner through presentations at the coalition meetings, one-on-one meetings with individual partner agencies, and at community events. Demonstrating the success of these efforts, quantitative responses across all three data collection time points reflected that participants continually considered the group to have *Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives* (WGM#1=4.10, WGM#3=4.16, WGM#5=4.20). In addition, partners increasingly felt there was a *Unique Purpose* distinguishing the coalition’s efforts from member agencies and/or existing collaborations (WGM#1=3.98, WGM#3=4.04, WGM#5=4.12).

Barriers to Coalition Functioning Over Time

Experiencing a Lack of Clarity over Member Roles and Responsibilities—

Although C2P leadership envisioned these coalitions as utilizing egalitarian decision-making processes, with ownership being transferred to the community over time, this did not appear to be clear among coalition members during their first year together. In the absence of clearly defined roles and responsibilities, the coalitions were at risk for negative outcomes such as member frustration or disengagement, uncoordinated or ineffective coalition actions, or members self-defining their roles in ways that were counter to coalition goals. Members expressed confusion over whether or not they were supposed to be on an equal plane with others in the coalition, or if there was a hierarchy of membership. These concerns were most strongly stated at the initial data collection. In addition, some participants noted that there were particular members who attempted to gain a disproportionate amount of power within the coalition.

“You have a variety, from smaller agencies to larger agencies... sometimes organizations... try to take control more so and to delegate responsibilities and roles instead of seeing themselves as one of the members... It’s a power play and really working on that.” (City 2 Researcher, WGM#1)

“In the initial phase, I think there is some hesitation in wondering what their roles are, how they’re defined, how in the working group meetings we can get that clear or how we can clarify that.” (City 3 Researcher, WGM#1)

Throughout their first year together, it appears that coalition members continued to struggle with how to define members’ roles and responsibilities in the coalition. The role confusion

and accompanying power struggles may have influenced participants' perceptions during the middle phase of the project about members' stake in the process and outcome of the coalition's work. At WGM#1 (mean=4.05), members reported a *Shared Stake in the Process and Outcome of the Work*. However, the mean score for this variable dropped just below the minimum criteria for a coalition strength mid-year at WGM#3 to 3.99 and reemerged as a strength (WGM#5=4.15). In addition, participants indicated that over time site research staff members shouldered a larger share of responsibility to a) keep the communication lines open, b) prevent friction among members, and c) keep information flowing to their coalition members. This suggests that their goal of an egalitarian coalition in which members equally shared authority and responsibility had not been fully realized.

Balancing Power and Resource Dynamics between Researchers and Community Partners—Another barrier to coalition functioning was balancing the unique access to resources and power held by both researchers and community partners. Whereas researchers possessed data and information valuable to service planning and applications for funding, community partners served as primary gatekeepers to populations of interest. Feedback about these power dynamics helped coalition members to share their individual perceptions regarding both researchers and community members, and allowed them to address these issues in an open environment. The following quote illustrates the power and resource dynamics specific to researchers.

“There is so much information that comes to the researchers first. In all honesty you have the ability to hold information, choose what information you want to share, and of course you can't communicate every single point. I think not being open can hinder any relationship.” (City 1 Researcher, WGM#1)

One coalition member noted the power of community members' gate-keeping role:

“...the community will know if you follow-through or if you don't... partners, based on their experiences, positive or negative or a little of both, will definitely communicate that to their community.” (City 3 Researcher WGM#1)

Balancing Coalition Building and Coalition Pace—Participants spoke of concerns that arose during the early development of the coalition, especially regarding differential views on the “appropriate” direction and pace of the coalition. The development process typically began with members getting to know each other, followed by the expression of variable sentiments regarding other members' intentions for collaboration, and eventually resulted in common goals for working together. Taking regular status checks on members' perceptions of their development as a functional organization gave coalitions the opportunity to address members' concerns before they become larger problems that could threaten coalition functioning. In familiarizing themselves with one another's background, work styles and area of focus, some members expressed uncertainty regarding the coalition's evolution. Although this phase was seen as exciting, there also seemed to be stress regarding the uncertainty of how the coalition would progress. One coalition member summed up these sentiments as follows:

“We're in the beginning stages of getting to know each other and working together and that really seems unpredictable... I think it's difficult to make sure we're growing and moving at the speed that we need to, but at the same time having all the components from the partners as well.” (City 1 Partner, WGM#1)

By WGM#3, some members were feeling a sense of frustration or stagnation with the process while others felt the group was gaining a shared understanding. These mixed feelings may be accounted for by the different professional foci and pace that drive the work of researchers (i.e., study of social concerns) and of service providers (i.e., intervention on

social concerns). The mixed sentiments expressed at WGM#3 coincide with dips at the same time in quantitative factors related to shared stake in the process and concerns related to hierarchy in the coalition: *Members Share a Stake in the Process and Outcome* (WGM1=4.02, WGM3=3.97, WGM#5 = 4.05) and *Skilled Leadership* (WGM1=4.37, WGM3=4.24, WGM#5 = 4.31). This suggests varying sentiments regarding the coalition's process and progress.

By WGM#5, coalition composition and goals became more solidified. Members were familiar with others in the coalition, had learned how to work together, and shared perspectives on what they hoped to achieve. At this point, members endorsed a greater sense of shared stake in the coalition's work and more positive assessments of coalition leadership as seen by elevated scores on WCFI factors (relative to WGM#3) *Members Share a Stake in the Process and Outcome* and *Skilled Leadership*. The following quotes illustrate different coalition paces:

"I think now it's kind of like ... What's forming now; we kind of just gel together."
(City 1 Researcher, WGM#5).

"A couple of our partners have expressed a lot of understanding about the project now. Especially yesterday, one of them said you know after this meeting, I'm finally starting to see the whole puzzle come together and after hearing that feedback from someone in the community that they're starting to understand the project a little more, is very encouraging." (City 3 Researcher, WGM#3)

Experiencing HIV/AIDS-Related Stigma—While quantitative results indicated that the political and social climates were favorable to the collaborative work of coalitions during their first year (WGM#1=4.02, WGM#3=4.00, WGM=3.98), qualitative results revealed contrary findings. At all time points, qualitative responses noted that community-wide stigma associated with HIV/AIDS limited coalitions' ability to secure community buy-in for C2P-related activities. This discrepancy between the quantitative factor related to political and social climate and qualitative findings may be explained by support for collaborative practices yet resistance or ignorance toward HIV-related work.

"Then again this whole HIV and AIDS thing has a stigma... there is a denial... I'd like to think that we're going to be able to put that word back out there, the facts and the hard data that shows the community is going to be dwindling." (City 3 Researcher, WGM#1)

Presenting these disparate findings allowed coalition members to identify contextual barriers and guided where they would focus their efforts in educating community members about HIV/AIDS.

Discussion

Community coalitions provide the opportunity to synergistically unite multiple constituents to address complex social issues. In order to assist in the development and maintenance of coalitions, community psychologists and other allied professionals need to understand the critical factors that impact the initial development and maintenance of these coalitions. This study sought to shed light on these processes by eliciting longitudinal insights from community partners and researchers involved in coalitions regarding factors that served as facilitators and barriers during the initial development and maintenance of their coalitions.

Four sub-themes emerged as specific facilitators of coalition functioning over time, including: a) developing group trust and cohesion, b) creating diverse coalition membership, c) developing a shared vision, and d) ensuring clarity of coalition purpose and goals. An

additional four sub-themes emerged as specific barriers to coalition functioning over time: a) experiencing a lack of clarity over member roles and responsibilities, b) balancing power/resource dynamics between researchers and community partners, c) balancing coalition building and coalition pace, and d) experiencing HIV/AIDS-related stigma. These findings highlight the complexity of relational, organizational, and contextual factors at multiple systemic levels that can serve to both facilitate and impede the successful development and maintenance of community coalitions. Thus, coalitions should address potential concerns within these various levels as soon as they arise, and may even create mechanisms to detect early potential systems failures in order to remedy them before negatively impacting the functioning of the coalition.

Strategies for Effective Coalitions

Creating an effective coalition requires assessment of individual and organizational expectations, while remaining attentive to the coalition's collective agenda. Results revealed the importance for coalitions to develop and communicate clear vision, mission, goals, and member roles. Although participants developed an understanding of the aims of C2P, ambiguity over roles may have incited power struggles among members and confusion over members' duties. In the absence of a defined coalition structure, members will create their own roles, which may or may not be synchronized with the coalition's aims. Furthermore, members who do not agree with or understand the coalition's purpose and/or goals may lack motivation to complete coalition activities. Those who do not understand their role in the coalition or who adopt an unproductive role (e.g. dominating coalition activities) may become easily frustrated by the ambiguity of their participation and reduce their involvement—or worse yet sabotage coalition goals. By establishing clear communication channels through multiple modalities and transparent, egalitarian decision-making models, ambiguity about roles can be minimized.

Results further indicated that the quality of relationships among members directly impacted their ability to work together. Past studies have indicated that cohesion, information sharing, trust, and collaborative practices among coalition members is inhibited when coalitions are more determined by interpersonal relationships than by inter-organizational relationships (Feinberg et al., 2005; Wells et al.2006). The current study echoed this need for open information sharing, but also shed further light on how contextual factors limit coalition member's ability to foster this type of environment. Specifically in climates where negative perceptions of researchers are strong, community partners reported concerns that the coalition could be a vehicle for furthering researchers' aims at the expense of the community. Moreover, challenges between community partners also threatened coalition relationships. Competition among member organizations, particularly during times of limited funding, reduced willingness to share information with potential competitors, despite the cooperative nature of the coalition.

Beyond internal factors that promote their success, coalition members must address external factors related to their success. First and foremost, externally-funded coalitions such as C2P should work proactively with community members to ensure that the coalitions' mission match the community's need. Without sufficient community involvement in coalition mission development or community needs and resource assessment, coalitions may introduce an agenda that does not address community priorities. Engaging community members to the full extent possible in all phases of coalition activities, including the development and implementation of the study, decision-making regarding study activities and staff development will be a critical first year practice for coalitions to demonstrate genuine respect and commitment to the community. Research staff members in the current study noted that making consistent efforts at reaching out to community members,

demonstrating genuineness, and maintaining commitments to provide services and information were preconditions to gaining the buy-in of many community partners.

Last, findings highlighted the challenges associated with sustaining a coalition within the unique context of the C2P coalition. HIV-related stigma inhibited the coalition's ability to achieve its goals in some communities. In addition, C2P coalition members indicated that bringing to the table only those within the HIV-related field was not sufficient to create lasting community-wide changes that would reduce HIV risk for youth. Determining which key stakeholders to involve beyond the traditional healthcare and social service providers will help prepare coalitions to address structural level change to reduce HIV risk. Coalitions engaging in this type of work are encouraged to assess community and organizational perceptions about HIV-related stigma in order to counteract future threats to their work.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study is a sole reliance on coalition members' self-reports, which may be susceptible to social desirability and recall biases. However, confidentiality of responses was assured to address this and longitudinal data collection reduced the likelihood of inaccurate recall due to prolonged passage of time. In addition, since quantitative data collection was determined by those who participated in each WGM and volunteered to complete the survey, the study was unable to track specific individuals' responses over time. Instead, the analysis relied on the combined quantitative responses collected at each meeting. Changes in coalition membership were another potential limitation for some coalitions, which resulted in data collection from different individuals over the course of the year, as opposed to the same cohort. However, this study aimed to capture group-level experiences within naturally-evolving community coalitions, which often involve fluidity of membership over time.

Recommendations

In order to engage and sustain participation, coalitions should integrate networking opportunities into their activities. This can be accomplished through collaborative coalition tasks and dedicated time for socializing. Coalitions may appear more appealing to potential members when they involve interactions with stakeholders from various community sectors.

Previous literature has indicated that social and political climates influence coalition activities (Rog et al., 2004). Future coalitions focused on social issues that have historically experienced varying levels of social misunderstanding and stigma may need to spend time specifically assessing sources of negative stereotypes that are both internal and external to the coalition. This may be particularly relevant when inviting agencies or organizations into the coalition who do not have a history of working with the specific social issue or population. Addressing external negative social misperceptions related to the coalition's social issue can be challenging, but some advances can be made through culturally-tailored public education and awareness campaigns that "humanize" the issue and demonstrate parallels to other pressing social and community concerns. In order to address internal stigma, coalition leaders can demonstrate respect for a variety of viewpoints and facilitate healthy discussion and conflict.

This study also offered insights into coalition assessment methodologies. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods supplied a deeper and more accurate understanding of coalition development. Although quantitative measures may provide more standardized assessments of constructs that have been explored in prior research and evaluations, they may miss factors that are unique to different coalitions. The measures also may lack the sensitivity to detect all coalition concerns. In the current study this is highlighted by the

voicing of multiple concerns during the qualitative CRPI, which was in sharp contrast to an absence of specific concerns noted on the WCFI factors survey. Researchers and evaluators of coalition development and functioning are strongly encouraged to adopt mixed-methods approaches to fully and accurately capture the phenomena that occur during coalition-based work.

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