

Meaningful Community Engagement in Qualitative Implementation Research

Key Takeaways:

- Meaningful community engagement helps implementation research to be culturally and contextually grounded, acceptable, and useful in achieving improved implementation and intervention outcomes likely to benefit populations with unmet needs. Such engagement is pivotal to developing appropriate and feasible research designs that can result in higher-quality data while reducing the chance that researchers will misinterpret or overinterpret findings. It is crucial for selecting and tailoring implementation strategies, training, and technical assistance for different groups involved in implementation and troubleshooting implementation barriers.
- Research has a track record of harming communities impacted by health and healthcare inequities. Having community members as key partners in research helps place ethical concerns about potential community impacts front and center, including during a study's conceptualization, implementation, and dissemination phases. Community partnerships are useful for preventing such harms while furthering social justice goals, reflecting the view that people with lived experiences have a right to be involved in decision-making about research with the potential to affect their lives.
- Researchers still typically 'invite' community members to work with them and facilitate research activities, placing them in a more privileged position from the beginning, even if, ideally, all partners are equally involved in all research phases. Analyzing privilege and power asymmetries shaping relationships framed as participatory in implementation science should become one of our central concerns.
- Pragmatic challenges can reinforce power differentials, including language and communication differences, technological constraints, inadequate transportation and childcare, and inequitable funding and resource allocation. The very structures researchers are used to operating in—for example, an advisory board or council—can also be off-putting and intimidating to others with less experience in such venues.
- Engaging community partners in meaningful ways means taking the time to develop trust and thinking critically about who benefits from the research and how these benefits are realized. These are issues that need to be reflected upon and continually revisited throughout the research process.



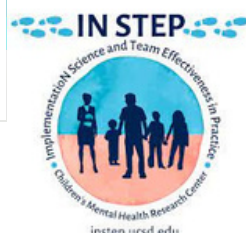
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Key Takeaways, continued:

- We must remember that terms like “community” are compelling and emotionally evocative, and there is no universal definition of community participation, including what it should be like or how it should be evaluated. The word “community” is often used to describe a set of existing or new social relationships but may rest upon “problematic assumptions of consensus, conformity, and solidarity” (Creed, 2007). We must think through how we define community in our implementation studies, ensuring that the definitions we select reflect local understandings and realities. Ultimately, we must consider whose voices are prioritized or excluded based on the selected definitions.
- Community participation is best thought of as a process rather than a product, and engagement depends on context. Engagement may need to be multilevel in implementation studies, using creative strategies to facilitate outreach, engagement, and ongoing participation (including in decision-making processes). Notably, the real-world demands of engagement can conflict with the need for precision, efficiency, and rapidity via the sometimes formulaic models and methods used in implementation research.
- Strategies to nurture meaningful community partnerships include being a consistent collaborator and committed co-learner, which means researchers should not be domineering or passive conveners who organize meetings when it's most convenient for them. There must also be openness to sharing leadership, decision-making, and resources. It is important to regularly clarify and revisit roles and responsibilities and training and support needs for all partners. A solid collaboration will aim to build on everyone's strengths and cultivate trust. Finally, we must be mindful of power and positionality and reflect on our practice and how to improve it.
- Finally, there is value in foregrounding co-creation in implementation research. Co-creation brings together diverse stakeholders to jointly create and integrate knowledge for real-world applications. Like community-based participatory research, it is about advancing health equity through relationship building and providing equitable means for participation. Through self-reflection and reciprocity, co-creation should be a transformative process to support knowledge production and sharing, skill-building, mutually beneficial relationships, and co-created outputs. Finally, co-creation should lead to longer-term relationships for meaningful community intervention and implementation research.

Useful Resource Texts

- Cooke, B., & Kothari, U. (Eds.). (2001). *Participation: The new tyranny?* Zed books.
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- Trickett, E., Rasmus, S. M., & Allen, J. (2020). Intervention fidelity in participatory research: a framework. *Educational Action Research*, 28(1), 128-141.
- Wallerstein, N., Duran, B., Oetzel, J. G., & Minkler, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity*. John Wiley & Sons.
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