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Barriers to conducting a community mobilisation intervention among youth in a rural South

African community

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Abstract

In the face of extreme poverty and inequality in South Africa, community mobilization

interventions represent an important way in which people can be empowered to improve their

lives. Successfully conducting community mobilization interventions in rural South African

communities requires anticipating and addressing a number of potential barriers in order to

maximize the chances of success of the intervention. The aim of this paper is to discuss some of

these barriers, which were identified through a case study of a youth project conducted in a rural

community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The potential barriers to the conduct of similar

interventions discussed include: gaining access to the community, composition of the project

group, issues of inclusion and exclusion, misunderstanding of project aims, language barriers,

accuracy and reliability of data, and "ownership" of the project.

Keywords: Community, mobilization, intervention, barriers, youth, poverty

Barriers to conducting a community mobilisation intervention among youth in a rural South

African community

Although almost a decade has passed since the transition to democracy in South Africa, the

country is still suffering from the inequality produced by colonisation and compounded by the

previous government's *Apartheid* policies (Klasen, 1997). Community mobilization

interventions represent an important way in which the problems faced by children in poor

communities may be addressed, especially children made vulnerable by the HIV/AIDS epidemic

(Van Rensburg et al., 2002). Simultaneously, they may offer an opportunity for young people to

be engaged in activities that improve their lives, and the lives of others in their communities.

These types of intervention encompass the concept of "helping communities to help themselves"

through capacity building, skill and knowledge development, and empowerment (McNeely,

1999; Santiago-Rivera, Morse & Hunt, 1998).

In conducting community mobilization interventions in rural South African communities,

it is necessary to anticipate a number of potential barriers that may hamper the success of the

intervention. The aim of this report is to identify some of these barriers, which are described

within the context of a particular project, conceived in the School of Psychology at the

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg[1].

Method

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[1] The project was devised by Professor Linda Richter and was filmed by Vuleka Productions. The 25-minute
videotape "Just a Little Smile", which premiered at the 2002 International Film Festival in Durban, is available for
distribution.

Design and procedure

This study employed a single case study design, which focuses on reaching an understanding of a particular case or phenomenon within its context (Yin, 1998). Yin (1998) suggests that this methodology is particularly suitable when using the multiple types of evidence and diverse data collection procedures that were employed in this study.

Qualitative data was collected through the methods of participant observation, interviews and group discussions (Yin, 1998). All the authors of this paper were members of the project team that implemented the community intervention, and data in the form of field notes were collected throughout the intervention. Individual interviews and group discussions with members of the community, particularly those closely involved in the project, were also conducted at various times during the course of the project.

Outline and aims of the project

A brief outline of the project on which this paper is based is included to describe the context within which our findings were generated.

The project aimed to address the needs of young children in disadvantaged communities, and the active role that young people can play to assist and support vulnerable children. The project enrolled a group of 15 young people from a rural community, most of whom were unemployed and out-of-school. The project consisted of three phases, all of which were filmed for a documentary, the goal of which was to describe the role of young people in supporting vulnerable children, and to illustrate how the difficulties of both children and caregivers can be ameliorated by the commitment and active involvement of young people.

In the first phase of the project, the young people conducted a community survey and identified vulnerable children who may benefit from assistance. The youth were then trained to assist vulnerable children by providing companionship, support and affection to children and caregivers (Hundeide, 1991), as well as assisting families in taking advantage of rights-based access to government provisions, such as social security grants for children seven years and younger, free schooling, powdered milk for destitute families, and school feeding

The second phase of the project involved the implementation of the intervention in the community, while in the third and final phase plans were made for withdrawal from the community and sustainability of the intervention. This paper focuses in particular on the first phase of the project, training for implementation.

It is important to note that, despite the barriers that we discuss in the following sections, the project eventually achieved important goals in serving as a significant demonstration project in the policy domains of care of orphans and vulnerable children. Furthermore, over 200 copies of the abovementioned documentary film were distributed worldwide, and several other organizations developed similar youth training programs were developed as a result of the film.

Results and Discussion

Gaining access

Before conducting a community intervention, it is necessary to engage in a process of dialogue and negotiation with members of the community in order to gain consent, access and cooperation (Israel et al., 2001). The elders and leaders of rural South African communities act as "gatekeepers" in this regard, and it is thus essential to gain their consent and support for the initiation of a project.

Access to the target community in this project was initially gained through an employee of a local spiritual retreat center located in the community. The spiritual organization's connections with the community *nduna*[2] facilitated the scheduling of an initial meeting during which the proposed project was explained and negotiations concerning its inception were conducted. The *nduna* convened a community meeting during which he presented the request, to which the community members responded favorably and granted consent for the initiation of the project. Community leaders were provided with regulated updates of the progress and activities of the project. In addition, one of the young group members was charged with the task of providing the community *nduna* and the senior chief of the broader area with regular progress and activity reports. It is thus important to recognize the need for comprehensive negotiation at many levels prior to the inception of a community-based intervention, as well as transparency and accountability through the course of the intervention (Israel et al., 2001). Projects cannot be initiated and maintained without the consent and collaboration of the community they serve (cf. Roche, 1998).

Group composition

The first difficulty with the group composition concerned the process of volunteering. The community composed a list of volunteers independently, and the project coordinators subsequently sought clarity about the process of volunteering from the community members. When group representatives were asked how the participants had been chosen they replied that

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[2] In South Africa in rural areas, especially in KwaZulu-Natal, traditional leaders control most aspects of people's lives. Incorporated into local governance structures, traditional leaders are meant to represent the interests of communities. In so doing, many traditional leaders consult communities through local meetings at which information is given and consensus is sought.

group members had "chosen themselves" (i.e. that they had volunteered to be a part of the project). However, when individual group members were asked about the process of the group formation they indicated that they had been selected by senior community members to take part in the project. This ambiguity may be partly a result of cultural differences between the researchers and the participants in their understandings of the terms "voluntariness" and "suitability" as judged by a variety of criteria.

A second difficulty regarding group composition arose during the course of the project, when three of the group members dropped out and were replaced by new members. This may have been caused partly by some members being required to travel long distances to group meetings without transport and also by people being away from home for a number of reasons. Although typical of rural projects, this phenomenon presents a challenge to projects that depend to some extent on group cohesion, mobilization and support. It is also a special vulnerability of youth projects, as young people are mobile, taking advantage of opportunities for casual paid work, as well as being sent by families to take up responsibilities in other households as needs change. In order to mitigate the negative effects of instability, no new members were allowed to join the group after the fifth meeting of the project group. This meant that only 11 youth, rather than the initially envisaged 15, received the training. However, these members represented a committed core of the original group and attended the majority of the project meetings.

It is important to be aware of the role that community dynamics, traditions and norms may play when recruiting participants for community mobilization interventions (McLean, 1997). While voluntary participation is the ideal, it is often not possible to ensure that it occurs within the existing power structures of the community. In addition, it is important to understand that group composition may fluctuate due to factors such as remote locations, poverty of

participants, absences of participants from the area, and other duties and responsibilities of participants in their families.

Inclusion and exclusion

Following the initial composition of the group of participants, difficulties relating to inclusion and exclusion arose. These difficulties involved apparent attempts by two individuals in the community to sabotage the project, possibly as a result of the threat that the project posed to their power in the community, or jealousy at not being included in the project youth group. While it was feared that these individuals would threaten the safety of the project group, the youth group members indicated during an in-depth discussion of this issue that they remained motivated to continue pursuing the project, so it was decided not to abandon or postpone the project at that time. Fortunately, no further incidents involving the issue arose during the course of the project.

During the community survey phase of the project, the youth group members were occasionally hindered in their task of mapping the community and identifying children in need by mistrust from certain members of the community. The youth group members reported that they were occasionally met with suspicion and even hostility, particularly from older community members, when they visited homes in the community in order to collect information. These difficulties appeared to arise from mistrust concerning the intended use of the information, as well as the fact that previous projects in the area had conducted similar surveys with no visible subsequent benefits to the community. As a result of this issue, the researchers discussed with the youth the implications of this mistrust for their own future status in the community. The group members were also briefed to ensure that the aims and intended outcomes of the project were fully explained to families before asking them for personal information.

It is thus important to anticipate resistance within communities when conducting youth mobilization interventions (Cowie, 1999). As was demonstrated in this project, this resistance may come from peer group members as well as from adults in the community and may be due to a number of issues including mistrust, jealousy and prior experience (cf. Israel et al., 2001).

Misunderstanding of project aims and community and group expectations

It became clear at an early stage of the project that many of the group members were expecting the community to receive material benefits as a result of their participation. These expectations may have been the result of a commonly shared conception of a "project" as something externally funded that provides material benefit to communities in need, and is a disquieting intimation of the way in which projects providing material assistance may influence community dynamics in perverse ways. Some members also had expectations of personal benefits such as becoming film stars, or gaining other forms of employment, through their involvement in the project.

The participants also expressed their concern that they had nothing concrete to offer the community as they were all from disadvantaged families, and it seemed as if they were initially unclear that the project was aimed at teaching them how to help and support young children. However, this was resolved as the project progressed and the young people came to understand, through their own experience, that by offering support, companionship and understanding, they could significantly assist others.

There was also initial misunderstanding between the project team and the participants regarding the definition of what a child is. The project team defined children in Western terms, according to their chronological age, and the intervention was aimed at providing support and

assistance specifically to pre-teen children. However, the traditional Zulu cultural definition, of a

child is dependent on marital status, with unmarried individuals (no matter their ages) being

defined as children, while married individuals are defined as adults (Letuka, 1998). Dependent

adults, such as those with mental and/or physical disabilities, are also regarded as being

equivalent to children. This definitional dilemma caused difficulties when participants were

asked to identify children in their community who needed assistance, as the youth group

members also embraced this definition of a child. It was thus necessary for the project team to

make the project aims clear to the participants, while also facilitating a "mind shift" from the

desire to acquire material goods or skills for the community towards focusing on their own

ability to contribute to the community. This includes the importance of allowing sufficient time

to ensuring that participants in this type of project are aware of the aims of the project, as well as

being confident of their ability to contribute towards achieving these aims. Furthermore, it is

vital to ensure congruence between the project team and participants with regard to definitions of

project partners, including target groups, project boundaries, time lines etc. This illustrates the

importance of negotiating the integration of Western scientific approaches with cultural and

ethnic norms of non-Western communities through the understanding of cultural differences and

the identification of a common purpose. (Israel et al., 2001; McLean, 1997; Santiago-Rivera et

al., 1998).

Language barriers

Language barriers proved to be a major difficulty throughout the course of the project. The

primary language of the target community was isiZulu, while none of the project team was fluent

in this language. Furthermore, few of group members had more than a basic command of the

English language. In the early stages of the project, when isiZulu-speaking employees of the film company involved were present at meetings, they were asked to assist with translation. At the remainder of the meetings, one of the group members, who was more fluent in English, was asked to translate when necessary. This in itself was potentially problematic, as it was impossible to verify the accuracy of the translations by this group member. The limited Zulu-speaking ability of the project team lead them to believe that at times the translator was omitting details while embellishing his translations with his own interpretation of the speaker's statements. As the project progressed, however, these language issues became less problematic, as it became clear that several of the group understood more English than it first appeared, but were shy about the level of their fluency. Researchers also overcame their inhibitions about their lack of competence in remembering and pronouncing isiZulu words.

These difficulties highlight the importance of, wherever possible, including fluent speakers of the target population's home language on project teams. However, this may often not be possible, which necessitates flexibility on the part of the researchers, through accessing and using alternative resources, which can often be found within the target community.

Accuracy and reliability of data

Following the completion of the community survey phase of the project, questions arose regarding the accuracy and reliability of the data collected by the youth group members, for two main reasons. Firstly, members of the community may have supplied inaccurate information out of a belief that the information may be used against them in some way, or because of taboos against disclosure of health status, particularly with respect the HIV/AIDS (Nxasana, 2001). Conversely, it is possible that community members may have held misconceptions about the

aims and intended outcomes of the project, which may have led to them providing inaccurate information in the hopes of gaining material benefits.

Secondly, although the type of rapid methodology used to gather information about the community in this project has been successful in other community projects and is valuable in its ability to empower community members (Thomas, 1998), the accuracy and reliability of the data collected may have been compromised by the fact that the young people who collected the data were not specifically trained in conducting surveys of this nature. Furthermore, the language barriers mentioned previously may have impacted on their understanding of the task that they were to perform.

Although the use of rapid assessment techniques such as those used in this community survey may be associated with limitations, they also served as useful instruments for gathering data in a time and resource limited setting. Furthermore, they empower the community members' using them and it allows for the utilization of community expertise on local conditions and their social connections with the broader community (Spoth, Guyll, Trudeau & Goldberg-Lillehoj, 2002).

"Ownership" of the project

The issue of "ownership" of the project arose as a point of contention during the course of the intervention. The spiritual organization had initially desired the implementation of the youth project following the success of a home-based project it had conceived in the community, but which had been interrupted because of lack of funding. In the meantime, the youth project team had secured the necessary funding and were engaged in the process of implementing the intervention. This led to some unease about the terrain of operation of the two projects, and the

spiritual organization feeling that it was being eclipsed by the youth project. This unseemly competition threatened to undermine the continuation of the project, and the youth group was forced to work independently of the spiritual organization.

A similar issue of ownership arose with respect to the documentary that was produced as part of the project. The producer of the film company contracted to make the documentary had different ideas with respect to its content and focus than those envisaged by the project leader. For example, the project leader wanted to profile poverty, which is the underlying cause of much of the suffering brought about by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. However, the producer wanted to focus on AIDS, because of its topicality and news value. This meant that a considerable amount of time had to be spent aligning points of view about what the project was about.

These issues highlight the importance of project ownership, and of negotiation and establishment of the roles of the various parties involved in the conduct of the project (Santiago-Rivera et al., 1998).

Conclusion

This project provided many examples of the types of barriers that may arise in attempting to

mobilise youth and provide them with the opportunity to actively work for social change in their

communities. McNeely (1999) suggests the importance of realizing that community development

tends to occur in increments, and it is necessary to face setbacks without being too "desperate for

final outcomes in the short term." (p. 750). Thus, rather than becoming despondent in the face of

such barriers, it is important to see them as challenges that, as they are faced and addressed, can

enhance future community mobilization initiatives.

　　　Projects such as this, which aim to actively involve the community in interventions, are

important in their power to merge the research process with community empowerment efforts. It

is hoped that the lessons learned in this study will provide important stepping-stones for future

research and interventions in similar settings.

Acknowledgements

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