Reviewer's report

Title: Overcoming barriers to engaging socioeconomically disadvantaged populations in CVD primary prevention: A qualitative study

Version: 1 Date: 23 November 2009

Reviewer: Shawn M Kneipp

Reviewer's report:

When assessing the work, please consider the following points:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? Yes
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? No
3. Are the data sound? Unclear
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? Not current qualitative standards.
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Difficult to comment given flaws in methodology/methods.
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? Yes, but inaccurately stated.
7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Yes
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Yes
9. Is the writing acceptable? Yes, but with some grammatical errors/typos, which can easily be corrected.

Reviewer's report

Overall, this study addresses an important topic where additional research is needed in order to advance health disparities research. The authors are commended for their careful attention to differences in recruitment observed during the main study, and their interest in better understanding how to engage these populations in the future. In the background, the authors maintain there is a paucity of research examining effective strategies to engage hard to reach populations in preventative medicine; while this may be true, there is a growing literature related to recruitment of disadvantaged / hard to reach populations into research studies (at least in the U.S.), which was underrepresented in the background section of the paper (see, for example, Yancey et al. (2006) for a comprehensive review). A major weakness of the paper is related to the scientific approach, methods, and interpretation as described below.

Please number your comments and divide them into
- Major Compulsory Revisions

The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached. For example, additional necessary experiments or controls, statistical mistakes, errors in interpretation.

The major weakness of the paper is that, although the authors present the study as a qualitative one, there are a number of issues with the methodology and data interpretation/presentation that calls into question the extent to which their approach is consistent with current standards for qualitative research.

First, there is no further description of what type of qualitative work is being conducted – or, put another way, which methodology is being applied (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory, etc.). Each of these methodologies is employed for a particular purpose, and there was no discussion around this. As a result, the authors appear to present a data collection method (i.e., focus groups) as a methodology, which are very different. To make a comparison to quantitative approaches, this omission in qualitative work is similar to an investigator reporting on whether data were collected in person or via telephone, but leaving out a description of the study design and other method guidelines that accompany a particular design (e.g., what process of randomization was used when reporting on a randomized trial, which would clearly violate the CONSORT guidelines widely used). While it is true there are many positive characteristics of using focus groups as a data collection method, this alone does not constitute a qualitative methodology. In addition, there is no real description of the protocols or approaches used in the focus groups, such as whether the facilitator had prior experience leading focus groups, whether an interview guide was used, and what the primary strategy was for asking the questions of interest in a way that enhances getting at the “depth” of their meaning, while avoiding getting off task (which can easily occur in focus groups). The authors do cite Kitzinger (1995) as a source for information in the conduct of focus groups; however, this appears to be an introductory level article and it is questionable whether it is sufficiently detailed to guide novice qualitative researchers. A suggestion would be to review the processes outlined in Krueger (1998), Moderating Focus Groups to both frame how this study was conducted and for future reference.

Second, there are some weaknesses in the approach for data analysis. The authors state “thematic analysis” was used, which involved “coding respondents’ talk into categories”, which were then further categorized to develop themes. On the one hand, the authors did improve the rigor of the analysis by including multiple analysts with varied backgrounds; however, on the other hand, strict adherence to solely “categorizing” verbatim narrative data does not represent findings that should be considered truly qualitative in nature (this is further addressed in the next section).

Third, the presentation of the results clearly flow from the analytic strategy used, whereby more than half of the “findings” presented are actually what could be considered verbatim “data” – or, verbatim quotes from respondents, as opposed to truly thematic analysis, which “reflects a greater degree of data transformation
... [and reflects] more of a discernible effort to move away from merely listing topics (or subjects brought up by participants) toward describing themes (or the patterned responses researchers discerned from the topics raised)” (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003, p. 912). Qualitative methodology, methods, and analysis are in a state of rapid maturation, which is needed to guide investigators and bring clarity to this interpretive endeavor. Sandelowski and colleagues have contributed significantly to this effort, and in the 2003 publication below bring a welcomed typology for determining whether qualitative findings are truly qualitative, or something else. Based on my interpretation of this work, and current typology to guide the assessment of qualitative research, the findings discussed in this manuscript are more consistent with a “no finding report” or “topical survey” commonly seen in qualitative studies, which “[present data] as if they were findings” (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003, p. 910).

Finally, the need for further study into qualitative methods is evident based on some of the limitations identified by the authors, such that there is likely to be “bias” due to small sample size, and attributing this to the weaknesses of purposive sampling. In reality, interpretive (qualitative) work is largely based on purposive sampling as an appropriate strategy.

Taken together, these weaknesses in the methodology, analysis, and interpretation of results appear to reveal a fatal flaw in study design and planning, which are unlikely to be remedied post-data collection. Unfortunately, what is often seen in the literature as examples of qualitative research give an impression of qualitative work as ‘design-less’ (or without methodological nuance), and ‘simple’, when in fact there are critical philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research that should be maintained, and a long history of scholarly traditions and standards that should be followed to maintain scientific integrity.

*Sandelowski & Barroso (2003), Classifying the findings in qualitative studies, Qualitative Health Research, 13: 905-923.

- Minor Essential Revisions

The author can be trusted to make these. For example, missing labels on figures, the wrong use of a term, spelling mistakes.

A number of typos throughout the paper.