Reviewer’s report

Title: How does community context influence coalitions in the formation stage? A multiple case study based on the Community Coalition Action Theory.

Version: 2 Date: 2 July 2009

Reviewer: Laura Downey

Reviewer’s report:

This manuscript is extremely timely to public health practice and well-written. Considering the amount of financial and human resources that are dedicated to coalition development for public health improvements, additional information on factors that result in positive coalition outcomes are desperately needed. Although a theory of coalition development (Butterfoss and Kegler, 2002) is widely referenced, there has been limited exploration of the ‘black box’ of community factors that certainly affects coalition outcomes. These authors have sought to extend the literature on the ill-defined variables that pertain to community context.

My primary concerns with the manuscript are explained in the following sections. These concerns pertain to thoroughly defining the key domains identified, ensuring quotes used in the Results section appropriately support the domain being discussed, and linking the findings of this study to the Community Coalition Action Theory. Additionally, some attention needs to be given to expanding the description of project methodology.

1. (Discretionary) Additional literature to review:

On page four, the authors discuss the cyclical nature of coalition development. A recently published article visually represents the iterative nature of development. For additional information, please review Downey, L.H., Ireson, C.L., Slavova, S.S., & McKee, G. Defining Elements of Success: A Critical Pathway of Coalition Development. Health Promotion Practice, 9(2):130-9. 2008. Findings from the two manuscripts complement each other nicely.

2. (Major Essential) Defining key domains identified:

Given the difficult nature of defining constructs such as history of collaboration, community politics and history, and community norms and values, the authors need to take additional steps to ensure the reader understands how the authors are defining the domains described in the manuscript. For example, the domain history of collaboration has an impact on coalition formation. However, it was never clearly described whether history collaboration dealt with members’ history of collaboration or collective history of collaboration in the community. It seems that collective history of collaboration would actually fall under the domain of community politics and history. These distinctions are never clearly defined. A simple table that describes the domains and how the researchers defined these domains would address many of these points of confusion. A table such as the
Domains | Explanation (definition) of domain | Quote
---|---|---
History of collaboration | | 
Geography | | 
Demographics | | 
Community politics, etc. | | 

3. (Major Essential) Refining the methods section:

According to the description of CHCC, there were originally nine primary evaluation sites included. Only eight sites were included in this study. Explain why one site was eliminated from the study.

On page eight, the authors explain that representatives from each site participated in the interviews. What types of position might these representatives have in the coalition (community)? Also, how were these representatives selected to be an interviewee? Was there a selection criteria used to identify potential participants? If so, describe it. Also, were the same representatives participating in an interview each year, or did different representatives participate in the interviews?

The detailed interview guide for each year was briefly described. Please clarify which of the interviews (one year/all three years) were analyzed for this manuscript. If interviews over multiple years were analyzed, did the themes ‘hold up’ over the various years, various representatives from each coalition? Those key concepts that emerged over multiple years, across multiple sites, across multiple interviewees would be an important criterion for what constituted a theme.

Provide further discussion of who (positions) comprised the project team on this manuscript. Were community members/representatives included on the project team as data analysts?

4. (Major Essential) Using appropriate quotes to support domains:

I realize the difficulty of identifying an appropriate name for a domain. Much thought has to go into identify in a concept that is wide-ranging, and this can be quite challenging. With this being said, the domain titled “geography” gives me a great deal of trouble. Most of the quotes used in the manuscript to support ‘geography’ seem to represent the demography of rural areas, not the geography. For example, on page 10, the following quote is provided: “…it’s also been a challenge, in that some times the people that were available locally to hire didn’t have the set of skills already that was needed in the position…it’s been an on the job training kind of a process.” I’m not sure how this is an issue relating to geography. If geography is the name of the domain, please draw a link between geography, rural, and educational issues. Some of the quotes used to support geography actually seem to be closer related to other domains, such as
demographic and economic characteristics. The quote cited above actually speaks educational attainment (typically a demographic variable) and opportunities for educational growth.

5. (Major Essential) Connecting these findings with the CCAT:
In your Discussion section, tie results from this research to the CCAT. Theory revision and testing is critical to refining our understanding of social change. How do your findings expand the CCAT? For example, in Butterfoss and Kegler (2002) there is a figure presented to explain coalition development. You have actually begun developing one portion of this model that has received very little attention. Imagine that you could paste your findings onto the model. What would it look like? A visual representation might be a helpful method for displaying your contribution to (expansion of) the model.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests