Reviewer’s report

Title: The role of community conversations in facilitating local HIV competence: Case study from eastern Zimbabwe

Version: 1 Date: 19 December 2012

Reviewer: Brenda Spencer

Reviewer’s report:

This article reports on interesting work using participative approaches that remain little known in the wider public health community and that deserve to have wider recognition. It should therefore be published. The theoretical underpinnings of the approach are well referenced and relevant detailed data on context are provided. The content analysis is well-structured and presented.

Major Compulsory Revisions

There are however anomalies in the presentation of the work that should be addressed before publication. More information needs to be provided on the methodology and in particular, the text should be reorganised in a more standard way, separating out the methodology, results and discussion. Currently, the Findings contain elements of method and of discussion in addition to the findings themselves, the Method section is incomplete and there is no Discussion section.

Given the unfamiliarity of this approach to many journal readers, considerable care must be taken to describe in great detail the process involved such that it becomes as transparent as possible and such that, allowing for context, it could be replicated elsewhere.

The Methods section should contain all the necessary information:

• How recruitment took place
• Was a purposive sample defined for recruitment?
• Duration of conversations
• Who were the facilitators, what skills did they have to do this, what training required?
• In which settings did the conversations take place, how were these organised?
• It is stated that the conversations were transcribed – one therefore presumes that these were audio-recorded but this should be explicitly stated, as should the process of obtaining consent for this
• What kinds of grid or guidelines were used to guide the community conversations, (main themes, structure, instructions to facilitators on guidance...)?
• What kind of contact and follow-up took place between participants at points in time between the formally organised community conversations?

In the present version of the article, some information is missing and, as
indicated above, some is located in the findings: for example, a large part of p9 is information that belongs in the Method section.

One particular difficulty that arises in reporting this work is attributable to the fact that community conversations are discursive spaces in which debate leading to change should take place while at the same time providing verbatim to illustrate how this change takes place and the perceptions of this experience from the point of view of those who take part. This exercise in reflexivity – reflecting on what is happening as it is happening – raises a number of issues that should be more extensively addressed in the methodology, results and discussion sections.

For example, at the foot of page 9 we read that Participants told the facilitators that the conversations improved their community's capacity to respond more positively. Conversations would therefore have to had already taken place for this remark to hold true.

The community conversations described differed from standard methodology in using external facilitators. This is really quite a significant difference that should be explored and discussed more. This point also touches on the reflexivity issue mentioned above: were conflicts experienced for those concerned in having the role of facilitation and research? These people are at times referred to in the text as facilitators, but on p.7 are referred to as trained researchers. Certain advantages are concluded in having taken external facilitators, but there may also have been disadvantages – in terms of sustainability of the effects of the intervention for example, a major concern in community development. Also, could the "higher status" of the facilitator have been in some detrimental to the method (they are perceived as "teaching" for example)? To what extent should use of external or internal facilitators depend on contextual issues?

Please supply a Discussion section including the various point mentioned above and interpretations on the recorded discourse that currently appear the findings, such as the benefit to participants of condemning the risky behaviour of others.

Minor Essential Revisions

Although referenced, the expressions "HIV competence "and "participation fatigue" nonetheless require a brief definition.

There are still a few typing and grammatical errors requiring correction.

Discretionary Revisions

I would have liked to have more evidence and discussion on the actual mechanisms of change hypothesised/observed to take place through the conversations (such as presented at the top of p15).

Do we know whether, as indicated in the citation on p18, the participants did continue to continue meeting?

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being
published

**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