Reviewer’s report

Title: What Fosters Sustainability and Systemic Transformation? Insights from a Realist Analysis of Trust-Building in Community Based Participatory Research.

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Reviewer: Nina Wallerstein

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Compulsory:

1) While I recognize the importance of this new use of the realist analysis methodology for CBPR, the authors make far too sweeping a claim of long-term impacts in general. They start this assertion in the abstract and then continue in the introduction, before presenting the data. My take is that they are conflating the analysis of trust and maintenance as a mechanism leading to sustainability impacts (which they do explore in the data) with assertions directed at all long-term effects. This style of assertion can easily be corrected throughout.

In their abstract, they state, “This study reports on the long-term effects of CBPR, using in-depth qualitative interviews with community and academic members of long-standing CBPR partnerships.” This sentence could easily be revised in accordance with their real reporting on trust-building and sustainability outcomes. In addition, the abstract should state the number of partnerships included not just the number of interviews. I would say also their assertion is probably overly ambitious given the limited number of interviews.

In the introduction, they have the same challenge. They state, “The review findings showed that the best examples of CBPR not only overcame barriers to research implementation, but through long-term commitments to trust-building, generated extensive benefits to individuals, settings and communities.” There are several problems with this statement. First of all, this is a statement that normally comes at the end of a paper. It seems they may be trying to present a summary of previous writing, but it wasn’t clear in my reading. They had just listed their multiple previous publications, but I wasn’t made aware of in which publication, this summary was actually written. Secondly, they are implying again that they have generated a list of extensive benefits to individuals, settings, and communities. They then go on to state that the long-term literature is thinner. But, to me the previous sentence of a claim of extensive benefits seems to imply “long-term.” These are all easy to fix.

3) A third major question that I’m left with is how they even chose trust building as a mechanism. This needs more substantiation from the case study methodology. Did they have many mechanisms and only choose one? Did this one appear more in the data? Their focus on partnership synergy in their Milbank paper was excellent, but I’m not sure where trust-building come from? There is a
statement in the Methods section that states a focus on trust, but does not provide any empirical rationale. “In this paper, we advance the partnership synergy theory by focusing on the main mechanisms of trust to suggest that trust building and maintenance is the foundation upon which long-term CBPR effects are generated.” Why is this a “main mechanism?” Also in the Results section, I’m not clear how they developed their four categories of trust development. “The dynamics and impact of trust building are organized across four sub-processes: (a) Initiation and Maintenance of Trust; (b) Proxy Trust; (c) Trust Built from Research Relevance; (d) Trust as Transformative Impact on the Research Context.” This could be better explained.

4) I would also recommend that the authors better place their study among other CBPR multi-site studies, including at a minimum the UCLA mental health services research on CBPR impacts (see Chung, B., Jones, L., Wells, K., Khodoyakov, D. various articles with other authors); and the national cross-site study of 200 partnerships in the US which has been testing a new conceptual CBPR model with various identified partnership mechanisms (Wallerstein and Duran, 2010; Hicks et al 2012; Oetzel et al, 2013; etc). The authors could do a better job in the introduction as well as the discussion in placing this realist research design and analysis within the broader field of CBPR. The CBPR conceptual model for example identifies similar constructs within the Context dimension that this paper could benefit from, ie., histories of research collaboration, mistrust vs. trust as part of this history. It only strengthens their paper to link to others’ work better.

On the specifics of how they presented the results, however, I kept looking for a reason or an easy to follow understanding of why one quote or one C-M-O followed the other. One highlighted quote followed by an interpretation of the C-M-O is not convincing to me as a qualitative researcher. I would therefore recommend a complete restructuring of the results to group them in categories. Some options could be: the various C-M-Os that follow from the same context could be grouped together; or the various C-M-Os with the same mechanism could be grouped together. I know the authors are excellent qualitative researchers, but their analysis and their interpretations and their presentation require more work.

8) If the introduction better situated this work and the results were better organized, then the discussion of trust and sustainability would also be clearer in its contribution, as well as being better situated within the broader field of CBPR.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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.