Reviewer’s report

Title: Institutional context and VCT practitioner narratives: possibilities and limitations for HIV prevention in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Reviewer: Andrew Secor

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STD/AIDS counselor's narratives in the context of Voluntary Counseling and Testing services (RJ, Brazil): potentials and limitations for prevention

Overview

This study explored the provision of HIV voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) among healthcare providers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil through qualitative interviews with VCT coordinators and counselors. The interaction between provider and service provision was explored from both institutional and personal narrative perspectives.

Overall comments

Overall the study provides an interesting look into provider perspectives on VCT, a crucial and well-promoted but not always well understood service. As the authors note, VCT has become even more salient in the context of treatment as prevention. While well-grounded in sociological theory, the manuscript does not often explain the various constructs being discussed, greatly reducing readability for the general population. The connection between the data and discussion and conclusions is not always clear, leading to conclusion statements that are not well validated, which is not to say unjustified. Reformatting the manuscript to more clearly separate the results and discussion, and tying the results more directly to the conclusions would greatly reduce these issues.
Specific comments

Abstract

1. In the abstract, the conclusion statements don't follow clearly from the results section. The results don't about synergetic individual-community approaches, risk approaches, or cross-sector issues, so how the conclusion is tied to the results is not clear without the body of the paper.

Background

1. Several constructs are discussed without much or any explanation of their meaning. These include person-centered approach, intersubjective perspective, and vulnerability approach. To increase comprehensibility among general readers, brief explanations of what these constructs are and how they relate to HIV and VCT would be beneficial.

2. The manuscript varies between describing the places providing voluntary counseling and testing as VCT ("only one VCT offered night services"), VCTs (e.g. "with VCTs coordinators"), and VCT services ("515 VCT services operating"). Switching between these throughout the manuscript causes some readability issues. Consider standardizing how you refer to places providing VCT.

Results

1. The results section includes a fair amount of discussion (e.g. from line 264: "Our findings suggest that, after two decades of operation, there has been a transformation in the VCT model, from preventive actions with more material and human resources to a more basic and assistance based model directed to diagnosis…."); which detracts from the presentation of the results and the flow of the manuscript. Such lines/sections should be moved down to the discussion section.

2. In addition to point #1, the results section makes a lot of statements not shown through data (quotes, quantification of responses, etc.). Decreasing the discussion and increasing the presentation of data in the results section would greatly improve this.

3. Lines 234-235: the phrase "hardly offered" doesn't provide much information. Consider quantifying this (e.g. "Only 5% of study VCT centers offered group counseling.")
4. Lines 238-239: "The counselors, however, believe that the informative approach of group counseling discourages the public." Consider going into more detail about why the counselors believe this discourages the public, and what exactly you mean by discouraging the public (discourages them from getting tested, engaging with any HIV services, etc.?)

5. Lines 408-410: "A greater or lower expectation in terms of a "truth confession" from the client was not directly associated with a social or professional characteristic of the counselor." Is this statement justified by the data collected?

Discussion

1. The discussion section needs to be greatly expanded upon. As is, it reads closer to a conclusion, and doesn't do much to tie the results to the actual conclusion. Create a clearer distinction between the results and discussion sections.

Conclusion

1. Similar to the discussion section, without a clearer link between the data and discussion the conclusions do not feel well validated (e.g. "tensions between risk approaches and vulnerability frameworks reduce the positive impact of VCT counseling"), which is certainly not to say unjustified. It would be beneficial to reformat parts of the manuscript to better link the data to the conclusions.

Spelling and grammar

General: Standardize whether numbers below ten are written in alpha (three) or numeric (3); this varies throughout the manuscript.

Line 20: Consider changing "Brazil has adopted the VCT strategy since 1988." to "Brazil has employed the VCT strategy since 1988." Or "Brazil adopted the VCT strategy in 1988."

Line 23: "affect" to "affects"

Line 28: "VCTs" to "VCT"

Line 36: "understanding clients" to "understanding of clients"

Line 37: "identify" to "identified"

Line 39: "regarding to their" should be changed to "regarding their"
Line 64: "China, Switzerland, etc." to "China, and Switzerland." The etc. is presumed through the wording ", including...."
Line 65: "(ARV)" to "(ART)" for anti-retroviral therapy instead of just antiretrovirals
Line 66-67: "Expanding access to anti-retroviral therapy (ARV) pushed forward in the beginning of 2000 (UNAIDS 2001)." This isn't a complete statement.
Line 69: "HIV test" to "HIV testing"
Line 69: "which based" to "which, based"
Line 77: "with emphasis" to "with an emphasis"
Line 78: "vulnerable population" to "vulnerable populations"
Line 82: "Studies" to "Some studies"
Line 86: "Research" to "Such research"
Line 86: "difficulties, which result from" to "difficulties resulting from"
Line 94: "are conflicting" to "conflict"
Line 110: "our study aim to" to "our study aimed to"
Line 111: "affect" to "affects"
Line 134-136: Recommend dropping "Due to the importance of counseling as a prevention strategy, this study discusses the counselors' practices and conceptions of HIV prevention." as it is redundant on prior statements
Line 144: Should this be "VCTs" or "VCT centers" instead of "VCT"
Line 145: "VCTs" to "VCT"
Line 149 - "Based on documental and institutional website research" - what is meant by documental is not clear.
Line 151: "VCT clients sought to be tested by spontaneous demand and referred 152 from other health services." This doesn't make clear sense. Consider rewording.
Line 153: "travesties" to "transvestites"
Line 153: "rural population" to "rural populations"
Line 155: "the selection criteria included at least one VCT 155 from each of the five state health department sub-regions where the ratio AIDS cases according to sex was 1.7 men to each woman." This statement isn't clear. Recommend breaking into two sentences - "…from each of the five state health departments. In these areas, the ratio of AIDS cases according to sex was 1.7 mean for each woman."
Line 157: "was sexual affecting" to "was sexual, affecting"
Line 163: "were developed" to "were conducted"
Line 165: "diversity in terms of undergraduate degrees" This statement is unclear - does it mean diversity in terms of whether respondents have undergraduate degrees or not, or diversity in terms of what kind of undergraduate degrees respondents have?
Line 168: "Each interview was conducted in just one encounter of approximately 60 minutes."
Consider changing to "Each interview was conducted in a single session lasting approximately 60 minutes."
Line 182: "Most interviewed was involved" to "Most respondents were involved"
Line 184: "to 20 years." to "and 20 years."
Line 188: "in systematize the" to "in systematizing the"
Line 205: Consider changing "alternative service to public health network." to "alternative service to the standard public health network."
Line 207: "including most vulnerable groups to HIV" to "including groups most vulnerable to HIV"
Lines 209-210: "with day-time hours" is unclear in the sentence context. Consider changing to "with only day-time hours" if that is true.
Line 214: "consultations and audiovisual resources scarce" to "consultations. Audiovisual resources were scarce."
Lines 219-220: "and serodiscordant). As well as continued" to "and serodiscordant) as well as continued"
Line 225: "and transgender population." to "and the transgendered population."
Line 230: "part of the VCTs current activities." to "part of the VCTs' current activities."
Line 232: "was defined as" to "is defined as"
Line 237: "makes difficult to" to "makes it difficult to"

Line 237+: There was not sufficient time to review the entire document for grammar. I would recommend a thorough copy-edit prior to publication.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.
Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.
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Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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