Reviewer’s report

Title: Exploring the perspectives of community members as research partners in rural and remote areas

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Reviewer: Shoba Dawson

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This paper focuses on providing an increased understanding of how to include community members from northern and rural areas as partners on research teams. The paper raises a number of interesting points such as ways factors that could be an enabler or barrier to involvement, recommendations for different stakeholders etc.

Overall, I felt the paper would benefit from more structure, including: a definition and explanation of knowledge user partners, more clarity regarding what data was collected and why; and a more considered exploration of the findings. The following points highlight more specifically how I think this paper could be improved:

Introduction

From a discussion around frameworks, it shifts to knowledge translation, and participatory approaches, it would be useful to add a sentence to make the link. Lines 130 to 134- How is this different from participatory approaches (e.g. community members are involved in community-based participatory approaches)? A more detailed explanation of how, if at all, this work fills the health inequalities gap/addresses those issues given that this is discussed in the paper in different sections. No mention of PPI in the global context, would be good to add a sentence on this. There is also a need for consistent use of terminology (involvement/engagement/participation). It does not matter which term the authors use as long as it is not used interchangeably, but it would be good to clarify that they mean working ‘with’ as research partners. The author could also place greater emphasis on what their study adds to what is already known and could provide better links around how this research builds on what is previously known. This is discussed to some extent in the discussion section but seems missing from the introduction. A more structured introduction could strengthen the author’s argument and clarify how the study hypotheses were developed.

Methods

Restructure methods section (flip the first two paragraphs for better structure). A reflection or discussion around who they involved and why in their research would be useful. Why emails were used, and only those from existing networks were contacted? Were any other approaches used? Given a discussed regarding underserved groups, inequality and people being left out, this does not seem to be an inclusive approach even in the context of participation, which is fine but would be useful to discuss limitations and strengths of such an approach. There is no mention of obtaining consent or how this was done.

Moreover, there is reference made to a recruitment matrix, what do they mean by this (an example would be useful). Lines 207-208 refer to the importance of anonymisation. It is essential ethically to do this when undertaking research, so not sure what this sentence adds. Unless this was an issue and the
researcher had to reassure them about this in order to elicit an open discussion and recording of the interviews. Lines 212 to 216 could be combined into a sentence, or the author can review this and present it more succinctly. Line 220 emerged from the data. Were knowledge users involved in data analyses provided any training on how to undertake qualitative analysis?

It would be useful if the author could provide more information about the content of the interviews and the method of analysis. For example: What topics did the interviews cover? Was data analysis concurrent with data collection, and was the interview schedule modified based on emerging findings? Why only 12 participants? Did they reach thematic or data saturation? The participant characteristics table has no information regarding ethnicity and experience of research.

Findings

It could be useful to present some information regarding the participant characteristics and if this influenced their views (e.g. any similarities or differences) to provide context for the subsequent findings. This could enhance the richness of the findings section as currently, it is descriptive.

The authors present the qualitative findings under three thematic sub-headings. However, I do not think that the conceptual names for the themes adequately represent the range of data presented within these sections. While there is better clarity of codes etc. in Table 2, this does not come through in this section. Perhaps the authors could review these conceptual names, and potentially make use of the language used by the participants. For example, the authors discuss the relevance, but this is at three different levels: research, personal and community. It would be good to draw this out a bit more and make it explicit in this section.

Data presented in the third theme appears to be related to building relationships and partnerships and training. I am not sure how this is around empowering participation. If through adequate training, they equip individuals to enable and encourage participation, then yes it covers empowerment. However, no such links have been made. Did anyone discuss training as a means for capacity building? While there is light-touch discussion around the need for understanding community needs, it feels like a missed opportunity as it is not explored further. Moreover, issues presented here seems more generic to involvement than for underserved groups, would be worth discussing specific and generic issues and distinguish them.

Discussion

In the discussion and the methods section, the authors refer to the framework. It would be useful to know and understand what it adds to what is known. Lines 417 to 428 do not seem relevant as I don't think this is mentioned elsewhere in the paper. Further emphasis on the strengths of the study and an explanation of how the findings build on what is already known and the limitations of the study should also be noted. Moreover, there is a lot of discussion around barriers and ways to address health inequities; however, this seems to be the missing link in the findings section.

Further, the authors have not explicitly stated what the study adds. It would be useful to think about restructuring the discussion section. I am unclear on how GRIPP 2 is used to report the findings here and whether it is relevant in this situation. Some explanation in the text to clarify this would be helpful. It would be helpful if the authors could provide a more detailed description of the implications of this research for policy and practice and highlight what evidence gaps remain and what gaps the current work has filled.
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