Principles for Participatory Research with American Indian and Alaska Native Communities: Lessons from the Circles of Care Initiative

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Poster Presented at the 2006 Conference Indigenous Suicide Prevention Research and Programs in Canada and the United States: Setting a Collaborative Agenda, Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 7-9, 2006. Sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Indian Health Service, Health Canada, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

INTRODUCTION

- Many authors have emphasized the importance of guiding principles for participatory research projects (e.g., Freeman, Iron Cloud-Two Dogs, Novins, & LeMaster, 2004; Israel et al., 2003; Jumper Thurman, Allen, & Deters, 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003).

- While these principles vary from author to author, a clear statement of principles and ongoing efforts and assessments of adherence to them is viewed as critical to the ultimate success of such work. (Freeman et al., 2004; Israel et al., 2003; Thurman et al., 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003).

- Here we review the principles we identified during our work with nine diverse American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities as part of the Circles of Care initiative (Freeman et al., 2004; Thurman et al., 2004) and compare these principles to those developed Israel et al. (2003) for community-based participatory research projects more broadly.

METHOD

The Circles of Care Initiative:

- Funded by the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), the Circles of Care initiative provides funding to plan, design, and assess the feasibility of implementing a culturally appropriate mental health service model for AI/AN children with serious emotional disturbances and their families.

- The first cycle of Circles of Care grantees were funded from 1998-2001:
  - Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Eagle Butte, South Dakota;
  - Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Talihina, Oklahoma;
  - Fairbanks Native Association, Fairbanks, Alaska;
  - Feather River Tribal Health, Oroville, California;
  - First Nations Community HealthSource, Albuquerque, New Mexico;
Novins et al., 2006

- In-Care Network, Billings, Montana;
- Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan;
- Oglala Lakota Tribe, Porcupine, South Dakota; and the
- Urban Indian Health Board/Native American Health Center, Oakland, California.

- Two other cycles of grantees have subsequently participated in the initiative (seven grantees funded from 2001-2004 and seven from 2005-2008.

Development of Principles for Strategic Planning, Evaluation, and Research:

- After the conclusion of their planning work, the first cycle grantees produced a series of ten academic papers, two of which (Freeman et al., 2004; Thurman et al., 2004) included a description of the principles underlying their participatory planning and evaluation efforts.

- As noted by the authors of these papers, “A set of basic strategic planning beliefs evolved naturally over the course of the Circles of Care initiative. These were not explicitly stated to the grantees, but over the course of the evaluation technical assistance workshops and site visits, the following strategic planning/evaluation principles became evident (Freeman et al., 2004, p. 23).”
  - In this poster, we compare the twelve principles described in these papers to those developed by Israel et al. (2003) in their description of the principles underlying community-based participatory research.

RESULTS

- The principles identified through the Circles of Care initiative were largely consistent with those described by Israel et al. (2003). See Table 1.
- In general, the principles identified through the Circles of Care process addressed provided more specific details regarding participatory work in AI/AN communities. For example, while Israel et al. (2003) address the importance of utilizing community strengths and resources, the principles emerging from Circles of Care provided greater specifics in this regard, including the following:
  - that specific issues should be considered in the participatory process, such as recognizing potential tensions emerging from diversity in traditions, culture, and rural-urban-reservation factors;
  - that AI/AN values, such as the establishment of trust, flexibility, reciprocity, suspending judgment, inclusion, and bravery should be used to define the participatory process; and
  - that the spirituality is likely to play a particularly important role in this process in AI/AN communities.
### Table 1. Guiding Principles Based Upon the Circles of Care Initiative (Freeman et al., 2004; Thurman et al., 2004) and Those Described by Israel et al. (2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLES FROM THE CIRCLES OF CARE INITIATIVE</th>
<th>CORRESPONDING PRINCIPLES FROM ISRAEL ET AL. (2003)</th>
<th>OVERARCHING PRINCIPLE</th>
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| • In effective strategic planning the unique characteristics and needs of different tribal entities are recognized, including recognizing tensions among traditions, culture, and rural-urban-reservation factors. | • Recognizes community as a unit of identity  
• Builds on strengths and resources within the community  
• Involves a long-term commitment by all partners. | PROCESS (1). Projects should be community-based, build upon the strengths of all research partners, and recognize the diversity of viewpoints and traditions within the community. |
| • The process of engagement for the evaluation is defined by a common set of AI/AN values that include the establishment of trust, flexibility, reciprocity, suspending judgment, inclusion, and bravery.  
• As in other aspects of AI/AN life, spiritual values become an important part of the evaluation process and how the evaluation is conducted. | • Promotes a co-learning and empowering process…  
• Facilitates collaborative, equitable involvement of all partners in all phases of the research.  
• Involves a cyclical and iterative process. | |
| • Effective strategic planning requires the direct participation of key stakeholders.  
• Successful strategic planning necessitates establishing staff credibility.  
• In effective strategic planning processes, evaluation and project development are integrative, though each has a distinct set of responsibilities. | • Addresses health from both positive and ecological perspectives.  
• Attends to social inequalities.  
• Integrates knowledge and intervention for mutual benefit of all partners. | PROCESS (2). Projects should rely on the development of a collaborative, inclusive investigative approach in which all participants share their skills, learn from each other, and appreciate the contributions of all team members. |
| • Effective strategic planning includes a central belief in change and change processes.  
• Evaluation occurs within a wider socio-political context in AI/AN communities.  
• Strategic planning processes need to be documented through process evaluation.  
• In the reporting of evaluation results, consensus or recognition of differences may be valued more than compromise in many AI/AN communities. | • Disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners. | BELIEF IN CHANGE. Projects should be based on the belief that change is possible – for individuals and families as well as communities – and that research can be a positive agent in the change process. |
| • Effective strategic planning encompasses an outcome-oriented approach, with outcomes determined by participatory action research methods. | | DISSEMINATION. Projects should disseminate study results to all key stakeholders. |

- Interestingly, the principles emerging from the Circles of Care initiative emphasize the importance of an outcomes-oriented approach, which is not mentioned by Israel et al. (2003).

- This focus on outcomes may represent the impact of the nature of the focus of the Circles of Care initiative, which provided a specific goal for the grantees to achieve.

- However, it is more likely that this represents the value these AI/AN communities placed on positive outcomes, which they felt would be best achieved through a participatory process.

- We found that the principle of consensus/recognition of differences in reporting evaluation results was particularly important in the Circles of Care evaluation. In many of the
participating communities, a consensus on the strategic plan emerged as one of the key outcomes to which the evaluation process contributed.

- The relationships of the four overarching principles for participatory evaluation, planning, and research in AI/AN communities is displayed in Figure 1. As emphasized by both Bess, Allen, and Deters (2004) regarding the Circles of Care initiative, and Israel et al. (2003) regarding participatory processes more general, these processes should be cyclical and iterative, building with each passing cycle.

- Similarly, the participatory principles that emerged from the Circles of Care initiative are interdependent upon one another, and build upon one another in an cyclical manner.

**Figure 1. The Relationships of the Four Overarching Principles for Participatory Research in the Circles of Care Initiative**

CONCLUSIONS

- While Circles of Care was originally designed with only the broadest of participatory processes in mind, a series of principles emerged that were highly consistent with those described for community-based participatory research, enriched by the unique local contexts of evaluation and strategic planning with AI/AN communities.
Although Circles of Care focused on strategic planning that was supported by an extensive evaluation effort, we believe that the principles are likely to be applicable to those projects with a more explicit research focus.

REFERENCES


SUPPORT: Federal Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; Indian Health Service; Department of Justice; and the National Institute of Mental Health.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Linda Son-Stone Barbara Plested, Teisha Simmons, and DeWayne Tahein for the conceptualizations presented in the papers on which this poster is based.