Understanding Transformative Learning Experiences of Peer Leaders in the Mpowerment Project

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of peer leaders in the Mpowerment Project, an HIV behavior intervention program, to determine factors of effectiveness in their work. Within a framework of transformative learning, the researcher explored motivation, traits, skills, and abilities brought to the experience, activities taken to ensure success, comparison of experiences and expectations, and perceptions extended to future leaders.

Problem

Peer leaders in the Mpowerment Project, a CDC DEBI program provide community-building activities with high-risk participants, but have little training or formal understanding of how to utilize personal skills, traits, and experiences to lead effectively. As a result, these HIV behavior intervention problems are only moderately effective.

A better understanding of personal learning processes, of both leaders and participants may provide more effective behavior change in high-risk program participants, resulting in lower rates of HIV infection.

Purpose

As Mpowerment Project peer leaders understand how they utilize transformative learning in addressing participants, the theory explaining how adults effectively learn is then extended to program participants, who effectively alter their personal actions as a result of learning more effectively.

By exploring the most effective means of adult learning in this context, participants may become more responsive to program efforts and become more likely to reduce their high-risk behaviors, effectively reducing HIV transmission rates among the target population.

Relevant Literature

Adult Transformative Learning Theory is largely credited to Friere (Apple, Gandin & Hypolito, 2001), as he developed an understanding of how disorienting dilemma **creates social change**. Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2000, 2003) extended this theory to include **basic learning of adults**, and other researchers joined him in proclaiming Transformative Learning as an effective vehicle for **personal and social change** (Baumgartner, 2005; Moon, 2011; Sands & Tennant, 2010).

Utilization of this theory in **healthcare and the HIV context** was informed by a variety of studies such as ones involving:
- Chinese schoolchildren (Li et al., 2010)
- HIV peer education in developing countries (Medley, Kennedy, O'Reilly, & Sweat, 2009)
- Transformative Learning and HIV behavior intervention **in specific cultural populations** (Mbeba et al., 2009; Steenbeek, 2004).

Research Questions

1. **What motivates individuals** to offer their time and energy to community-building efforts in a behavioral intervention program like the Mpowerment Project?

2. **What common traits, skills, and abilities** do these individuals bring to the peer leadership experience in the Mpowerment Project?

3. **What activities and tools** do these individuals search out during this experience in order to be more successful as a peer leader in the Mpowerment Project?

4. **How do the actual experiences** of leadership individuals in the Mpowerment Project **compare** with pre-leadership expectations?

5. **What leadership experiences can individuals offer** to assist future per leaders in being more effective?

Procedures

Using a purposeful sampling strategy, three interviews were collected from six individual Mpowerment Project peer leaders for a total of **18 interviews**:

- Individual Initial Interview
- Individual Post-Leadership Debriefing Interview
- Individual Final Interview

Data Analysis

Raw data were **transcribed** and analyzed for initial impressions.

Data were **open coded** for detailed textual analysis.

Data were **axial coded** to reduce emergent issues into themes directly related to guiding research questions.

Findings

Findings of this research detail components of transformative learning in personal experiences of program peer leaders. As participants explore leadership roles, they…

1. develop an understanding of the personal tools they brought with them into the leadership experience.

2. develop a desire for better understanding of how program participants effectively learn and change high-risk behaviors.

3. develop a plan for how they could promote their understanding of transformative learning among newly-recruited peer leaders.

Limitations

- Differences among participants/populations in varying geographical regions.

- Differences among recruiting and training programs for participants entering the project.

- Data collection was limited by inaccessibility to the closed population group (based on culture, and age) and the data collection was based on the perceptions of the participants, not observations.

Conclusions

Understanding how program participants effectively learn is important in a variety of healthcare and behavior intervention programs, as effective learning translates into more successful program outcomes.

Mpowerment Project peer leaders bring a variety of personal transformative learning experiences into the leadership role, and through extension of those personal transformative learning experiences, they more effectively lower high-risk behaviors among program participants and train future peer leaders to do the same.

Both efforts result in the program outcome of lowering rates of high-risk sexual behavior.

Social Change Implications

In addition to providing practical tools, the research and project assisted program leaders in integrating newly learned education processes into existing program activities, increasing the effectiveness of HIV prevention efforts on the local level.

Social change implications are supported through the widespread acceptance and implementation of the findings of this study into regional Mpowerment Project efforts and a review of inclusion in a wide array of regional behavioral intervention and healthcare programs.