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“There's Gotta be Some Give and Take”: Community Partner Perspectives on Benefits and Contributions associated with Community Partnerships for Youth

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Abstract

Successful community partnerships for youth are based on the premise that reciprocity exists between all parties, but to what extent is equal power actually present? The current investigation examines the benefits and contributions associated with partnerships from community partners' perspectives. Respondents from 15 different Connect to Protect® coalitions initiated by the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions were interviewed at the onset of their partnerships. Community partners asserted that their contributions to partnerships are more varied than researchers', yet they perceived that researchers acquire more kinds of benefits. Findings indicate nuances regarding reciprocity and power inequities between partners. Community partners' insights have implications for defining best practices within partnerships that benefit youth.

Keywords

Health; Qualitative Methods; Partnerships; Sexual Behavior; HIV/STI

Collaborations form between researchers and communities in order to implement a variety of youth-serving projects, including participatory research and social action (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, Quintana, & Perez, 2004; Ross, 2011), health-related

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interventions (Baptiste et al., 2005; Harper et al., 2004), and impact assessments and program evaluations (Flicker, 2008; Sieverding et al., 2005). Such partnerships typically operate on the premise that all parties will mutually benefit from the arrangement (Schulz, Israel, Selig, & Bayer, 1998). Community-based organizations (CBOs) provide settings in which researchers can apply “real world” solutions to social problems. Reciprocally, researchers offer members of CBOs their expertise in building capacity, evaluating programs, and gaining access to their affiliated institutions (Afshar, 2005; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). The present study investigates the exchange of contributions and benefits within community partnerships for youth from the viewpoint of the CBO partner during the initial stages of partnership formation.

Forging collaborative relationships between researchers and community partners entails an intentional process of selection and establishing reciprocity (Harper & Salina, 2000) and an acknowledgement of contextual and interactive factors that may pose threats to the partnership (Suarez-Balcazar, Harper, & Lewis, 2005). Successful collaboration requires realistic assessments of what each entity can deliver to the partnership, especially considering inherent differences in institutional power, personal power, credentials, experience, and professional connections (Binson, Harper, Grinstead, & Haynes-Sanstad, 1997; Harper & Salina, 2000; Mai, Kramer, & Luebbert, 2005). Perceived expertise often gives researchers priority in agendasetting, legitimacy in research activities, and power within the overall partnership (Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Pokorny et al., 2004). Interpersonal, institutional, and larger systemic conflicts may persist as a result of inequitable decision-making processes and access to resources (Afshar, 2005; Bayne-Smith, Mizrahi, & Garcia, 2008; Robles-Schrader, Harper, Purnell, Monarrez, & Ellen, 2012). Arguably, researchers' perspectives are often privileged and promoted within partnerships.

Community perspectives, the underdeveloped side of partnerships, have started to emerge across disciplines in recent years. Researchers have documented contextual factors of relationships through the lens of CBO staff members (Brodsky et al., 2004), shared authorship with CBO partners within examinations focused on reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships (Harper et al., 2004), and assessed how differing incentives and agendas lead to conflict in research partnerships (Ferman & Hill, 2004).

Despite this emerging focus on community perspectives, more research is needed to determine the extent to which reciprocity exists, is desired, and is actually possible within partnerships. The major purpose of the current project is to advance knowledge and understanding about community partnerships from the perspective of CBO representatives. Given former privileging of researcher perspectives within the extant literature on community partnerships and the need to focus solely on the viewpoints of community members and agencies, the current inquiry does not include a comparative exploration between CBO representatives and researchers. The present research focuses on the experiences of community partners engaged in coalitions that were formed in communities throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico to prevent HIV among youth who face marginalization.

Connect to Protect® (C2P) is a multi-site research project that aims to reduce HIV/AIDS incidence and prevalence among youth through community mobilization and structural

change in fifteen urban cities in the U.S. and Puerto Rico (Ziff, Harper, Chutuape et al., 2006). CBO representatives and researchers formed coalitions that aimed to reduce risk factors associated with HIV transmission and acquisition in youth (Harper, Willard, Ellen, & Adolescent Medicine Trials Network, 2012). C2P consists of multiple phases that begin with the creation of HIV/AIDS epidemiological profiles for each urban area and lead to coalition development and capacity building. The most notable aspect of C2P is the unique emphasis on forming and sustaining partnerships between CBO representatives and researchers. Success is not only measured by each coalition's progress on joint projects, but also on the progress of the partnerships themselves. The current investigation draws from information collected at the onset of C2P development to examine the viewpoints of CBO representatives as partnerships begin.

Although prior literature has outlined general successes and challenges of community partnerships (Fisher, Fabricant, & Simmons, 2004; Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobsen, & Allen, 2001; Minkler, 2004), CBO representatives' voices often go undocumented. Through the current investigation, researchers can gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of community partners' perspectives as partnerships first form. The focus of the present study is on the perspectives of CBO partners regarding a) the perceived contributions that each party (community partner and researcher) makes to partnerships and b) the perceived benefits that each party acquires as a result of partnerships.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 26 community partners from each of fifteen coalitions developed as part of a community mobilization HIV prevention intervention project initiated by the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions (ATN). The ATN is a collaborative network established in 2001 by the National Institutes of Health to implement clinical, biological, and behavioral research with youth at risk for or living with HIV/AIDS. Connect to Protect® (C2P) is the community-based primary prevention infrastructure of the ATN. Research partners represented both clinical providers and research units based at universities, hospitals, and medical centers (Ziff et al., 2006). Community partners, who were the participants for the current study, comprised health, education, and social service agency staff members (e.g., Executive Directors, Program Coordinators, Outreach Staff Members) and community leaders. Participants represented institutions and CBOs in the following community areas: Baltimore, Boston, Bronx, Chicago, Ft. Lauderdale, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York City (differentiated from the Bronx), Philadelphia, Puerto Rico, San Diego, San Francisco, Tampa, and Washington, D.C. Minimal demographic data were collected and recorded in order to protect the confidentiality of respondents and to increase the likelihood of participation from community members. The interviews were conducted with the primary purpose of informing and enhancing the early development of the C2P coalitions.

Procedures

Working Group Meetings (WGM) were held approximately every two months at each of the fifteen sites during the early development of the coalitions. The current study focuses on data that were collected following the first working group meeting that was held for each coalition, or WGM#1. Thus, the attitudes expressed by respondents were elicited at the beginning of the collaborative process rather than after they had long-term experience participating in the partnerships.

The study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at each of the 15 sites, as well as at all research team members' home institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 community partners approximately two weeks after the WGM took place. Prior to the interview, an informed consent process was conducted with each community partner to clarify the purpose of the study and to confirm participation. Data were primarily collected to help enhance the development and structural functioning of the coalitions. The Community Researcher Partnership Interview (CRPI) was the semi-structured interview guide that was developed specifically for the C2P project and assessed the qualities and characteristics of coalitions. This measure was adapted from Fawcett and colleagues' (1995) Critical Event Interview. Content areas within the CRPI included coalition members' roles and involvement, benefits and challenges of collaboration, and necessary factors for achieving coalitional objectives. Sample questions included, "In what ways do community partners contribute to a successful community-researcher partnership?" and "In what ways do researchers benefit from a successful community-researcher partnership?" Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following transcription, 25% of transcripts were randomly selected and reviewed for accuracy, with minimal errors identified and corrected.

Analysis

To begin, data were organized into four primary content areas: Community Partner Contributions, Researcher Contributions, Community Partner Benefits, and Researcher Benefits. These a priori areas of inquiry were explored within the interview transcripts and were aligned with existing literature on community partnerships. An inductive analysis procedure was utilized to allow patterns, themes, and categories of analysis to emerge from the transcribed interview data. The approach to analysis was phenomenological in nature to address the lived experiences of CBO representatives. The focus of the current examination was on individual and shared experiences and the meanings given to those experiences, which resulted in clustered respondents' statements into categories of common narratives. Through this approach, the researcher examines each individual's experiences, draws connections to the experiences of similar others, and uncovers the larger framework to describe the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1998). Characteristic quotes are used to illustrate the concepts and themes revealed through the interviews. Each quote is credited to a community partner from one of the fifteen coalition sites, but has been de-identified to ensure anonymity. Labels following characteristic quotes include anonymized site names and numbers to account for multiple respondents from the same site.

Results

Representatives from CBOs provided their perspectives regarding four areas of inquiry focusing on contributions and benefits associated with community partnerships for youth: Community Partner Contributions, Researcher Contributions, Community Partner Benefits, and Researcher Benefits. Results presented here are from community partner perspectives only. See Table 1 for the Summary of Themes related to these topic areas.

The first area of inquiry was *Community Partner Contributions*, which was defined as the roles that community partners play in contributing to the partnership. Four themes emerged from the data: *Community Partner as Key Holder*, *Community Partner as Historian*, *Community Partner as Provider*, and *Community Partner as Research Support*. *Community Partner as Key Holder* refers to how community partners act as gatekeepers between community members and researchers. Establishing relationships between community members and researchers was noted as a major contribution that CBO representatives make to the partnership. One participant described how CBO representatives serve a vital role in connecting researchers to community, noting that researchers can be perceived as interlopers. As the participant stated,

Number one, [community partners] give entry, I mean if you partner with the community then they're gonna give you entry into that community...they're gonna let you know what's going on in that community.

Site H, #1

To participants, the community partner serves as a *Key Holder* by reaching out to populations otherwise inaccessible to researchers.

The *Community Partner as Historian* theme refers to the rich historical and experiential knowledge that community partners add to partnerships. Community partners supply contextual information as well as innovative ideas that might be new to researchers. As one participant noted, CBO representatives provide insights to researchers about working with particular populations. This participant stated,

Oh, information is added. We understand what the researchers don't unless you're one of those who work on the ground and enable it...what does the criminal justice system do, get intelligence information, information from sources who can help inform your strategy and the data you want to get. And those usual sources would be in the community, the neighborhoods, and the people and we're the intermediary buffer between desensitizing, you know, or demystifying the researchers to the community.

Site B, #2

In this case, the participant noted how community partners contribute ideas and information and also serve as intermediaries between community members and researchers.

Community Partner as Provider refers to how community partners provide tangible resources such as space, materials, and/or technology to the partnership. One participant noted that community partners contribute:

Resources, whether it be money, staff, or space. So that people don't have to go to community centers in the projects or that may not be as safe and accessible. Here we have security guards, people can come here and feel safe...there are not that many great spaces in [the area].

Site C, #1

The *Community Partner as Research Support* theme refers to how community partners contribute support specific to the research process. In particular, partners help provide community input for instrument development, participant recruitment, project implementation, and information dissemination. Research support differs from resource provision as it involves feedback and research activities. Community partners help:

Identify needs of community, reviewing instruments, inviting community to do that. CBOs have a concept of community and culture and collect sensitive and necessary information without being insensitive. Like the fact we can review the questions.

Site I, #1

Community partners can also offer research support by disseminating results to community members. As one participant stated,

One of the ways that we contribute is to utilize their research. I think that one of the assets is being able to share the information, provide information at work groups, I think that's important to improve the research.

Site N, #2

The second area of inquiry was *Researcher Contributions*, which was defined as the ways in which community partners perceive researchers contributing to the partnership. As with all areas of inquiry, perspectives from community partners, not researchers, are given here. Three themes emerged from the data: *Researcher as Producer*, *Researcher as Informed Outsider*, and *Researcher as Broker*. *Researcher as Producer* refers to the resulting research, data, and statistics that researchers contribute to the partnership. Research gained through the partnership is used to support organizational and coalitional initiatives as well as advocacy efforts. One participant said,

I think that the final outcomes of the research really help organizations to be enthusiastic about what's going on. So, the researcher is of course enthusiastic, because they're the ones who [are] saying, "Hey, I need to do research to the community." I think that the community-based organizations or communities are enthusiastic about the research because depending on the outcomes or depending on what they believe the outcomes to be, that'll help get more funding or open up the eyes of local or state politicians of what the needs are in the community.

Site C, #1

According to participants, researchers produce results for the community partnership, which in turn supports community partners, CBOs, and coalitions.

The *Researcher as Informed Outsider* theme refers to how researchers contribute information and expertise to the community partnership. Researchers draw upon past research experience, judgment, and insight to inform the partnership. Participants recognized that researchers, as educated outsiders, bring valuable viewpoints to the project. One participant noted that researchers provide:

The information that makes sense out of what people are experiencing every day and when you're experiencing something every day you can't see the forest from the trees, you're so enmeshed in it, you don't know what the big picture looks like.... so the researcher is supposed to be kind of a neutral person, you know unbiased, and you know just the facts ma'am.

Site J, #2

Participants acknowledged the necessity of knowing the current state of the field for the sake of partnership activities. Also, beyond information, a certain amount of prestige is contributed to the partnership due to the perceived and real expertise of researchers.

The *Researcher as Broker* theme is defined as access to resources such as people, funding, and research that researchers provide to the partnership. One participant stated,

It's really the researcher more than anything. It can be a grant proposal they know about, people they want to introduce you to, they know what you do, they have what you do in mind. They may introduce you to someone you have never heard of before...it's kind of a comfort thing. I know I can pick up the phone and call and get some information...it's like having a team of people who can hook you up or give you numbers when you need things because they have access to a lot. I almost feel as if I have access to it because they have access to it.

Site D, #1

For participants, having access to researchers and their networks contributes greatly to the partnership and to the work as a whole, even beyond specific projects.

The third area of inquiry was *Community Partner Benefits*, which included ways in which a community partner benefits from the partnership. Two themes emerged from the data: *Dissemination* and *Improvement*. *Dissemination* is defined as community partners and community members benefiting from the partnership by receiving results from the research. Research from the partnership informs, legitimizes, or adds validity to community work, leading to meaningful rewards for the community. One participant noted that community members benefit most when researchers share data and results with them, stating,

I just feel strongly about this information getting back to the community through these partnerships so that we can build strategies and then also advocate for resources to carry out those intervention strategies in our community...Bring it back, inform us, educate us and then give us some suggestions as to what could be some intervening strategies. You know, there's gotta be some give and take.

Site B, #2

For another participant, communicating results to other CBOs and to city departments strengthens the research impact. Results dissemination is a critical community benefit that allows for integration of research findings into “real world” settings.

Improvement is defined as community partners and community members benefiting from the partnership through achieving outcomes that improve the work and solve “real world” problems. One participant noted the importance of follow-up action, saying,

[When] the information has been assimilated and absorbed and approved by the community...That information can then be used as a catalyst for implementing an action plan to alleviate whatever the problem is that the research is about...When you pick what you choose to research, it should be something that is really in an area of great need and then the focus of that research should be something that leads you to some solutions to solve the problems that the community is experiencing.

Site J, #2

For participants, the relevance of the research is especially important. From the perspective of participants, community partners benefit not from research done for research's sake, but for the sake of enhancing the work done with and within communities.

The fourth area of inquiry was *Researcher Benefits*, which was defined as the ways in which community partners perceive researchers benefiting from the partnership. Five themes emerged from the data: *Access to Community*, *Access to Primary Sources*, *Experiential Learning*, *Lasting Recognition*, and *Real World Application*. *Access to Community* refers to how the partnership benefits researchers since they have access to their target population and to the community as a whole. Community partners acknowledge the crucial role they play in granting researchers access to certain populations and in serving as an intermediary between community residents and researchers. As another participant stated,

Again, I just don't think [researchers would] be able to handle... [or] practice within the community on their own...they're just too removed from certain communities. Yeah, [community partners are] definitely that bridge from the kids on the street to researchers.

Site G, #1

In this case, the distance between researchers and community members is too great to surmount without the help of a mediator. According to participants, the partnership with community representatives allows for researchers to conduct their work within communities.

The second *Researcher Benefits* theme, *Access to Primary Sources*, refers to how researchers benefit from the insider knowledge, insights, and perspectives of community partners. As a result of the partnership, researchers are privileged to gain information held by *Primary Sources*: community partners and community members. As one participant noted, “[Researchers] benefit by getting information from the source, the community” (Site E, #1). Related to *Access to Community*, but beyond access to research participants,

researchers benefit by receiving information from entrée negotiated by CBO representatives. One participant stated,

[Researchers] get an intermediary to develop that trust to get at that information that they need to get. I think that then researchers find out things that they normally would not have thought of in putting a lot of their study instruments together...to say, "Are there questions, is there something missing here that we're not looking at?" They end up getting that information. So I think if you're thinking about the research process as fueling the partnership, because you've got another set of eyes that could be very objective.

Site B, #2

According to participants, community partners offer perspectives that researchers do not possess. The partnership reduces the distance between researchers and the community.

Experiential Learning, the third *Researcher Benefits* theme, refers to how researchers benefit by learning directly from community exposure. In effect, researchers receive unique education and training as a result of the community partnership. One participant described how researchers benefit by receiving:

Information that's not in the books you know. I think the agencies, the partners come out and talk about their experiences. It's not academic or it's not documented but it's through experiences that you don't usually get to see or read. [Interviewer: *It's like lived experiences.*] Definitely. Oh yeah, I remember where one case where, you know like that.

Site E, #3

The community partnership can allow researchers personal and professional development opportunities that are not readily available within typical academic settings. As another participant noted, the partnership "gives [researchers] more expertise in community-based research. Exposes them to a different type of population" (Site I, #2).

The fourth *Researcher Benefits* theme, *Lasting Recognition*, is defined as the ways in which researchers benefit from the partnership by receiving authorship, prestige, and/or funding for their community-based work that often outlives the project. Such residual rewards can lead to increased professional opportunities for the researcher in the future. One participant noted the benefit of addressing community needs, but the larger benefit of gaining recognition:

[Researchers] get to see their work accomplished and being able to provide services is something that's needed. They get to see the tangible evidence of efforts and they benefit by that, but they definitely take credit for it. It's helpful for them to get funding, additional projects and build bigger and greater partnerships and collaboration. They get all the credit, it's their name. The larger groups or the institution gets recognition for their efforts. It kind of gives them a name and that they're doing something in the community.

Site B, #1

Participants stated that researchers benefit by publishing their findings and securing their place in their respective academic fields. As one participant noted, researchers achieve “notoriety of having data that doesn't previously exist” (Site I, #1).

The fifth *Researcher Benefits* theme, *Real World Application*, refers to how researchers benefit from utilizing the community as their laboratory. Through the partnership, researchers can test the extent to which theory holds up to practice by examining results in a “real world” setting. Related to yet distinct from the theme of *Experiential Learning*, this theme goes beyond personal and professional development to the verification of ideas and, ultimately, the improvement of social conditions. A participant stated,

The researcher has the benefit of knowing that his research has stood up against the reality check and...if they are so interested to have their research applied that they know it's something that can actually be utilized to improve conditions.

Site J, #2

Tangible results gained through the partnership can direct best approaches and strategies for community-based research. Researchers benefit from real world application of their work in order to test the effectiveness of certain approaches and interventions.

Discussion

Overall, this investigation yielded insights about community partnerships for youth from the perspective of community partners at the beginning of the collaborative process. Both community partners and researchers bring unique strengths—personal and institutional. Partnerships can produce rewards and incentives for all parties involved. Findings revealed similarities and differences in perceived contributions that each party makes and benefits that each party acquires as a result of the partnership. The following discussion explores how, according to community partners, each party contributes to and benefits from the partnership, details what is shared and unique, and offers implications for practice. Notably, these findings illustrate the complicated nature of reciprocity, as it exists alongside power differentials.

Contributions

Points of convergence in the contributions that each party makes to community partnerships for youth were revealed. Respondents acknowledged that both community partners and researchers provide useful and specialized information. As previous research has indicated, complementary skills and knowledge contributed by each party strengthens relationships and joint projects (Bayne-Smith et al., 2008; Doll et al., 2012; Peterson, 2009). The nature of reciprocity, though, is challenged when examining each party's contribution of expertise and the ways in which such contributions are valued.

The current community respondents' insights mirror findings from previous literature about partnerships, specifically regarding the construction of expertise. Researcher expertise has historically been assigned more value and prerogative than community expertise, particularly by academic and governmental institutions (Fisher et al., 2004). Such imbalance dilutes the value of community contributions to partnership. Respondents within the current

study stated that community partners make meaningful contributions rooted in their indigenous knowledge and innovative ideas. However, unless contrasting epistemologies of all parties are valued equally, partnership processes will privilege researchers' expertise over community partners'.

Partners also converge on their contributions of access. Based on their position and professional connections, both parties share access to resources such as space, funding, and networks of people. However, there are distinctions between the types of access researchers and communities provide. Researchers can make particular contributions based on affiliations to universities, which possess "relatively steady revenue streams, constituent groups of alumni, and access to power brokers" (Fisher et al., 2004, p. 30). In contrast to university researchers, Fisher et al. (2004) noted that CBOs and community members often lack strong constituent bases, stable revenue sources, and relationships with power brokers. Again, an imbalance leads to a power differential that restricts community partners from full and equal participation compared to researchers.

Another point of convergence involved contributions through research, although specifics differ in terms of processes and outputs. The experiences of CBO representatives revealed shared contributions to research support and capacity; both parties' contributions make it possible for the other partner to conduct research. However, the nature of research contributions was somewhat nuanced between parties. For respondents, community partners contributed primarily to the research process while researchers contributed to nearly all aspects, from the collection and analysis to the reporting of results from the partnership. This finding reflects prior literature on partnerships that asserts that community partner research contributions are often relegated to participant recruitment rather than full involvement in all research aspects, from planning through dissemination of results (Pokorny et al., 2004). Practitioners have acknowledged the difficulty in ensuring reciprocity with community partners, particularly regarding shared control within certain research processes (Israel et al., 1998). Differential research contributions between parties affect ownership, authorship, and benefits associated with the community partnership.

Benefits

CBO representatives noted that both community partners and researchers profit from improving social conditions through successful partnerships. Researcher perspectives documented within the extant literature have revealed that community engagement is spurred by pressure to effectively address social problems or otherwise risk social irrelevance and institutional decline (d'Arlach et al., 2009; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Researchers' success within community partnerships often symbolizes their affiliated institutions' ability to address social issues. Community partners likewise represent their organizations, but also represent the population of interest. Respondents within the current investigation advocated on behalf of their youth constituencies, noting the importance of positively changing the environment, reducing incidence rates, and increasing access to services through the partnership. Even though motivations for improving social conditions might differ, the goal remains the same across parties.

Challenges to reciprocity emerge when rewards associated with credit and authorship complicate the partnership. Harper and Salina (2000) suggested that within collaborations, all partners should have the opportunity to share in the preparation of papers and receive appropriate authorship credit for their contributions. Although respondents within the current project did not mention the possibility of community partner authorship, they did note that researchers solely benefit by publishing findings from the project. Publications lead to academic and professional incentives for researchers, who acquire prestige, increased funding, and promotion and tenure. Community partners do not accrue these same benefits, unless given the opportunity by researchers to assist with journal articles, conference presentations, and other forms of data dissemination.

Analysis across topic areas revealed consistency in respondents' perceptions of what community partners contribute and how researchers benefit from partnerships. In particular, researchers benefit by receiving access and information from community partners. Literature on partnerships mirrors this finding, indicating that community partners' contributions of knowledge, practical insights, and access directly benefit researchers and the work of the partnership (Ferman & Hill, 2004; Rappaport, Alegria, Mulvaney-Day, & Boyle, 2008). A conventional assumption of partnerships held by some researchers involves sharing power as a noble sacrifice (Isenberg, Loomis, Humphreys, & Maton, 2004). Isenberg et al. (2004) challenged this notion, asserting that the collaborative partnership serves a crucial facilitative function in helping researchers create questions and procedures, gain community entrée, and gather and analyze data. Partnership development might require extra time, effort, and hard work, but ultimately, the partnership makes work easier for researchers and produces higher quality results.

In the present study, CBO representatives perceived that community partners and researchers differ on the benefits they accrue as a result of the partnership. On the whole, respondents asserted that benefits for researchers outweighed benefits for community partners in type and in magnitude. Respondents stated the incentives for community partners involve the dissemination of results and improvement of social conditions, which typically occur at a project's completion and in the best cases extend beyond the partnership. On the other hand, respondents asserted that benefits for researchers occurred throughout the partnership, from initial community access to continued on-the-ground professional development. Upon reporting and publishing results, researchers reap the benefit of lasting recognition. According to prior literature, researchers and their institutions uphold that successful partnerships achieve the basic purpose of creating knowledge (Bayne-Smith et al., 2008; Israel et al., 1998). The question is, knowledge for whom? Based on the current project, community partners perceive that the creation of knowledge serves researchers' agendas from the beginning of the project and throughout its duration. This imbalance illustrates that partnership reciprocity is not always synonymous with equal power. Reciprocity suggests that both partners make contributions to the partnership and that both partners receive benefits, but as illustrated, the frequency and intensity of the contributions and benefits may not be equivalent.

Reciprocity and Power Sharing?

Findings from the current study point to the need to further examine the nature and degree of reciprocity in community partnerships for youth, and suggest that the notion of reciprocity is more nuanced than previous literature has found. Respondents shared their views on the unequal distribution of contributions and benefits associated with partnerships. Community partners risk their relationships, reputation, and legitimacy with their constituencies by affiliating with researchers and institutions whose actions they cannot control (Afshar, 2005). From another viewpoint, community partners may lack control over researchers, but actually possess power in allowing (or restricting) researchers' access to community. Without community partners, researchers often experience difficulty in gaining community entrée, which may either delay or deny a project's onset.

The nature of power within community partnerships is dynamic. The extent to which project activities differentially privilege a community partner or a researcher changes throughout the partnership; and this may vary in terms of degree, duration, and depth. The value of individual contributions and benefits does not remain static. As noted by respondents in the current study, multiple contributions attributed to community partners throughout the partnership lead to multiple benefits accrued by researchers. These findings suggest that over time, "access to and value of resources are varied" between partners (Isenberg et al., 2004, p. 127).

Actions can be taken to maximize the value of individuals' contributions to actualize benefits for all partners. Working toward equalizing benefits and contributions involves candid discussion between community partners and researchers at the beginning of the partnership. Ideally, the intentional approach to dialogue will regard all parties as contributors and beneficiaries of partnership, but acknowledge the nuances of the relationship that may lead to conflict. This strategy can facilitate shared goal making in spite of power differentials, allowing people to confront individual realities. Conflict between parties may be necessary (Isenberg et al., 2004), especially when negotiating across power, class, racial and ethnic, and other social differences.

Fundamentally, insights shared by community partners within the current project challenged the notion that equal power sharing is achievable, or even desirable. In the "real world" are truly reciprocal and equivalent exchanges possible within community partnerships? At every step of the partnership, assumptions must be challenged. For example, the premise that power sharing naturally serves all parties equally warrants investigation. According to Plumb, Collins, Cordeiro, and Kavanaugh-Lynch (2008), some community partners do not find power imbalances problematic; based on perceived levels of expertise, researchers were expected to effectively direct and control the project, with community partners willing to relinquish power. The authors raised valuable questions regarding this issue:

Can community members make an informed choice not to participate 'equitably,' or is it to be assumed that the unequal power is the result of an uninformed decision, coercion by the academic researcher, or intimidation by the very idea of research? Is required empowerment itself a contradiction (pg. 94)?

Such questions obscure partnership as presumably and necessarily equal in contributions, benefits, and shared power. There is no “one size fits all” solution to the problem of power sharing within community partnerships. Instead, the opportunity for community partners and researchers to convene and devise alternative strategies makes real the spirit of collaboration.

Limitations and Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

Although the current investigation reveals important findings about community partnerships for youth, certain limitations must be considered. Notably, data collection for the current project was to serve a primarily evaluative purpose, therefore more in-depth inquiry regarding different aspects of participants' responses was not practical. Data described here were restricted to insights from community partners, not researchers, thus both entities in the partnerships were not represented and compared. The lack of researcher voice hinders the opportunity for comparative analysis within the present study. However, the extant literature on partnerships offers standpoints of researchers and their affiliated institutions. The current project sought to elucidate the underdeveloped side of partnership research: perspectives of community partners. Future investigations may wish to conduct more in-depth explorations of community representatives' and researchers' perspectives, and analyze the data for thematic similarities and differences. Findings in the current study also reflect the experiences of community partners at the start of partnership, and their perceptions may change after being actively engaged in these partnerships over time. More longitudinal analyses of partners' perspectives would help to better understand long-term partnerships, and would allow for the exploration of critical concepts such as reciprocity and power sharing over the course of a partnership. Longitudinal investigations of community partnerships would benefit from the utilization of mixed-methods designs that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data in order to develop a more complex understanding of these partnerships.

Results from the current project indicate that various issues must be considered when CBO representatives and researchers enter into partnership with one another. First, integrating community partner perspectives in defining partnership and project success should occur at formative stages. Successful community partnerships must start from a place of mutual trust and respect. Significant time should be allotted to engaging in trust building through activities and face-to-face interactions. Respondents stressed the importance of examining the shared and unique contributions and benefits experienced in partnership. Within initial meetings, community partners and researchers should engage in dialogue to determine the roles that each party will play as well as how to work toward sharing power, if it is desired by all parties. Negotiating differential power issues starts with critically addressing what each party will contribute to and gain from the partnership (Mai et al., 2005). Through group reflections and expectations-setting meetings, all parties can explore the extent to which their values align and decide what steps to take to promote partnership success.

Second, both community partners and researchers must assess the personal and professional strengths they bring to the partnership and project. For example, all parties should take inventory of their own research competencies, skills, and training. Researchers have

documented that meaningful participation is promoted when all parties possess some common research knowledge and practice (Harper & Salina, 2000; Keys, McMahon, Sanchez, London, & Abdul-Adil, 2004). Importantly, building community partners' research capacity should be determined as desirable first. Equal power sharing might seem ideal and well intentioned in theory, but might be disempowering and unreasonable in practice.

Finally, the current project highlights the importance of ethical considerations in collaborative projects, from power dynamics to inequitable resource access and allocation. Paradoxically, working toward power sharing has the potential to disempower members of the partnership. To start, community partners and researchers should honestly and comprehensively reflect on their social locations and implications for the project. Implementation plans must account for the possible positive and negative impacts that all stakeholders might experience. Throughout the partnership, regular assessment and monitoring should include evaluation of partnership processes in addition to project milestones (Harper et al., 2004; Harper, Neubauer, Bangi, & Francisco, 2008). Future research should continue to discover strategies for preventing iatrogenic effects and for maximizing benefits of partnerships.

Although the experiences of certain partnership elements inherently differ between community partners and researchers, working toward equalizing such elements can promote reciprocity and mutuality. The potential for positive youth and community outcomes weighs heavily on the relationship between community partners and researchers.

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Table 1
Summary of Themes from Community Partner Interviews

	Community Partner	Researcher
Contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Partner as Key Holder • Community Partner as Historian • Community Partner as Provider • Community Partner as Research Supporter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher as Producer • Researcher as Informed Outsider • Researcher as Broker
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissemination • Improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to Community • Primary Sources • Experiential Learning • Lasting Recognition • Real World Application