MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH: ENGAGING COMMUNITY FOR RESEARCH IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

This panel discussion was one of the sessions in International Multidisciplinary Prospective Research in Education and Social Sciences (IMPRESS21) conference that took place on 7-9 September 2021. This discussion was about community involvement in mental health research and the panel members were Professor Mohamed Hatta Shaharom, a senior medical practitioner and Professor of Psychiatry. Next panellist, Dr. Kahar Abdulla is an International Coordinator at European Alliance against Depression who is passionate in increasing mental health awareness in the community. Final panellist, Mr. Gan Chun Hong is a lecturer and clinical psychologist whose work focuses on the area of rehabilitation clinical psychology. The aim of this discussion is to illustrate the role of community in mental health management, research and in post-graduate training. This discussion hopes to highlights the needs of community engagement in mental health research for an impactful outcome.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Research Impact, Engaging Community*

BACKGROUND

There is a growing interest in the role of community in research mental health care, even before the emergence of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Before moving further into how to engage the community in mental health research or any other form of research, first, we need to understand the concept of community. The concept of community can be understood from various perspectives (Rahman et al, 2020). But for this paper basically community can be understood from system perspectives (community is like a living creature, comprising different parts that served specialized functions, activities, or interests, and which operate within specific boundaries to meet specific needs); secondly, social perspective, there is the social and political networks that link individuals, community organizations, and leaders together; thirdly, virtual perspective, to dates community are linked and relied more on computer-mediated communications to access information, meet people, and make decisions that affect their lives; and lastly individual perspective, the community may have a sense of belonging to more than one community where their sense of membership can change over time and may affect their participation in community activities. All the four perspectives of community need to be learned to understand how individuals understand their identity and connections, enter into relationships, and form communities before engaging them in research.
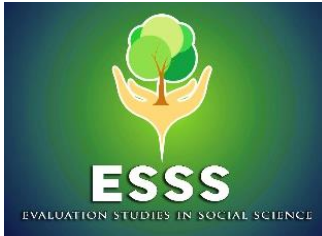
The need for community involvement in research stems from the interest of the researchers, an expert in a certain field, or the community leaders, policymakers, and funders to address problems facing communities. Furthermore, engaging the community in research can be a way to ensure that research is aligned to the needs of research users and therefore impactful (Purtle, 2017). There are several models for engaging the community in research to exist, including community-based participatory research; empowerment evaluation; participatory or community action research; and participatory rapid appraisal. For example, Community Based Participatory Research has been a widely used research approach where it increases community understanding of the issues under study and enhances researchers' ability to understand community priorities, the importance of addressing community priorities, and the need for culturally sensitive communications and research approaches (Kopelovich, Monroe-DeVita, Buck *et al.* 2021). Nonetheless, a question arises on how and what is the role of the community can play and contribute in the research process, and the utilization of the research findings locally. A panel discussion was organized with a different panel of experts from different institutions to address the question of community engagement in mental health research in Malaysia. The discussion has highlighted the importance of community engagement in mental health management, research as well as postgraduate training.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT

The joining of the term 'community and 'engagement' has broadened the scope with the shift of initial focus on the individual to the collective, with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure consideration is made of the diversity that exists within any community. Therefore, the term community engagement is referring to "a process of inclusive participation that supports mutual respect of values, strategies, and actions for an authentic partnership of people affiliated by geographic location, shared interest, or similar circumstances to address issues affecting community wellbeing". In general, the goals of community engagement are to build trust, enlist new resources and allies, create better communication, and improve overall health outcomes as successful projects evolve into lasting collaborations. The rationale for community engagement in promoting health and research is largely rooted in the recognition that lifestyles, behaviours, and the incidence of illness are all shaped by social and physical environments. Engagement of the community can take many forms which include organized groups, agencies, institutions, or individuals.

According to Professor Dr. Datuk Hatta Shaharom, the President of the Malaysian Society of Psychospiritual Therapy, the efforts to educate the public on mental health have increased over the years. The government and non-governmental organizations advocating programs for awareness have improved people's mental health that comes from various backgrounds. The awareness to empower the community on preventive measures as part of managing mental health issues in Malaysia has shown great progress.

The awareness is getting people to acknowledge their mental health problems and actively look into approaches to keep them under control. Mental health and psychospiritual
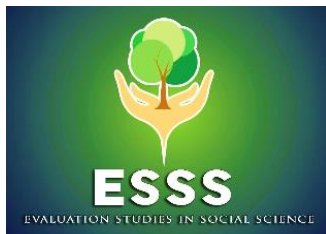
wellbeing must include all the four domains of the holistic needs of basic human health; i.e. the biological, social, psychological, and spiritual. People who understand the impact of stress on their health would find preventive measures to avoid unnecessary stress and mental illness. Successful coping strategies would also be part of successful people's positive lifestyle. Medical practitioners must manage their patients' illnesses with a holistic approach that is coupled with a multicultural paradigm in a multi-ethnic community. It is essential to include medical practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, religious leaders and practitioners, and mental health volunteers for a community-based mental health program.

Medical research should continue to include those looking into the ethics and efficacy of treatment techniques that are carried out by traditional healers who work independently or practise in conjunction with medical practitioners. There is increasing evidence that medical practitioners, psychiatrists, and psychologists of various fields are integrating psychospiritual elements and psychospiritual therapeutic methods in their practice. All these advances or even controversies that they may contain must be subjected to research.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

Communities are made up of diverse groups with different histories, social structures, value systems, and cultural understandings of the world. Researchers and practitioners need to understand the cultural dynamics of specific groups and institutions to build relationships, collaborate, and build respect and trust. Meaningful community participation can be done through the generation of ideas, contributions to decision making, and sharing of responsibility and foremost the project addresses their issues. An absence of mutual respect and co-learning may result in a loss of time, trust, resources, and, most importantly, effectiveness.

Dr Kahar Abdulla, an International Coordinator at the European Alliance against Depression, Germany, has conducted research looking into physical exercise as a potential therapy option for those suffering from mental disorders. He outlined challenges when introducing exercise therapy in a community setting, such as macro-level factors (e.g. cultural norms, policy, national guidelines) and micro-level factors (e.g. motivation, self-efficacy, attitude). In addition, environmental factors such as good physical infrastructure accessible to the target population are indispensable for scaling-up of physical activity interventions in the community. Furthermore, to raise public awareness, public relations activities such as mass media campaigns are necessary to help the community to realize the need for and importance of exercise for a healthy mind and body. Therefore, in addition to conducting more evidence-based research in the field, researchers also carry the responsibility of active engagement and dissemination in the local community and the general public, advocation and engagement with the policymakers to ensure sufficient investment from the governmental level in the physical activity for fitness as well as for treatment solutions for mental disorders.

Integrating community into research doesn't mean the general population or specific community alone, but the other relevant organization or institutions such as Education or
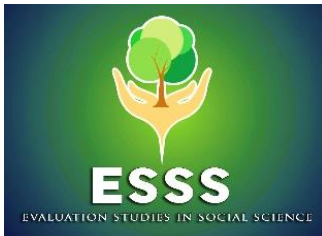
Health should come together to ensure that the research outcome can be disseminated to all relevant beneficiaries. To sum, there is a significant need to engage the community in research from the beginning of planning research. The researcher will take into consideration the psychosocial factors, and community participation is crucial during the initiation of the research to ensure fruitful beneficial data can be gathered. Lastly, communicating the research outcome for the benefit of the general community.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH POSTGRADUATE TRAINING

Researchers conducting community engagement in research need appropriate education and training not typically offered by traditional doctoral and master's level curricula. The field needs long-term programs that integrate the knowledge and skills of experienced community and researcher partners in high-quality participatory research to build the capacity of young and traditionally trained researchers and scientists interested in pursuing community engagement in research.

Mr. Gan Chun Hong, Lecturer and Clinical Psychology Practitioner, sees a clinical psychologist plays a crucial role in getting the community to be empowered in confronting mental health problems in society. The clinical psychologist is also responsible for advocating the community in the acceptance of the clinical patients after their treatments. It is a challenging task for the psychologist to draw programs that accommodates the clinical patients into the community and to function as a regular member. In such instances, the psychologist has to design holistic and systemic interventions in gearing towards an inclusive community. The intervention needs support and multidisciplinary professionals to work on the interventions for the community. Experts from various backgrounds help to address the multicultural elements and values in the community for a successful intervention. These kinds of community based intervention will benefit from the evidence obtained from research that based on community. The four perspectives of community as indicated earlier: system, social, virtual and individual are vital to be included in order to produce community research that are practical and applicable in intervening mental health concerns in the community itself.

Furthermore, the educationalists should encourage students or trainees to engage themselves with the community. The educationist should plan the learning activities that provide the opportunity for the students to have hands-on experiences and interaction with members of the community from various backgrounds. The students or trainees need to get closer to the community to learn their needs. Academic activities and continuous self-development programs such as webinars, the conference is vital for the future psychologist to develop their network and a gateway into the community. The access to community will enhance the trainees' clinical skills and prepare them for their careers. The educational and practicum activities together with the clinical works of the students can be designed in the ways that lead in sparking research questions related to community. Multidisciplinary involvement in a research team from psychologist, psychiatrist, various allied health professionals such as
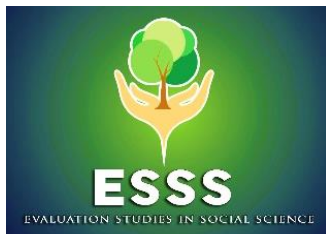
occupational therapist, physical therapist, dietician, social worker as well as other fields of expertise for examples special education, social welfare policy maker, social administration etc. not only will enhance the networking and collaboration in clinical works but also ensure holistic views on the research that eventually enrich the clinical knowledge to be helpful to the clients.

CONCLUSION

Community engagement in mental health research, with special attention to minority communities, may help to remedy this shortfall by demonstrating respect for communities in practical ways. Two potential outgrowths of demonstrating respect specifically through community engagement are (1) the production of research that is more relevant to the community and (2) the mitigation of asymmetry in the researcher-community relationship. The importance of a holistic approach in addressing mental health problems, especially the spirituality aspects needs to be focused on and addressed for betterment in life. It is recommended that multicultural and cross-cultural studies are essential to truly understand the community of various backgrounds. The cultural understanding helps the professional to address issues from the community that can enhance their skills in drawing interventions that are customized for patients with a specific background. Where the customized interventions would increase the recovery rate among the patients. Also, researchers need to maintain their connection with the community to monitor the interventions.

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