

Adopting an open science mindset to community-based research practices

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Introduction

Research focused on transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) health has increased nearly tenfold over the past decade (Riselay et al., 2023). This increase has numerous benefits, including ensuring TGD people's experiences are represented in our academic and health care systems. The execution of TGD-focused research, however, has outpaced the adoption of community-based research practices. A recent systematic review of health research involving sexual- and gender-diverse people identified only 48 United States-based studies published between 2010 and 2022 that mentioned using community-based participatory research or any community-engaged practices (Ricks et al., 2022). As TGD people and/or researchers working in TGD health, we implore the Editorial Board at the International Journal of Transgender Health to *require* increased transparency about community involvement in research submitted to the journal. We acknowledge that editorial board members have importantly emphasized the need to involve TGD people in TGD-focused health research, and that the journal has increasingly requested for authors to provide positionality or reflexivity statements (Riggs et al., 2024). As described below, there are key reasons to instead *require* information about community-based research practices from authors (rather than *request*), and we provide recommendations for implementing this change below.

The importance of community-engagement in TGD-focused health research

Although there are notable barriers to the broad adoption of community engagement, these barriers do not outweigh the inherent benefits. Meaningfully engaging the TGD community in TGD-focused research is consistent with the notion “nothing about us, without us,” a phrase first popularized by the disability justice movement (Charlton, 1998). This simple and poignant slogan is the foundation of community engagement, wherein matters of, about, or related to a given community must include ongoing collaboration with community members with lived experience, from conceptualization through to implementation (Collins et al., 2018; Jackson & Moorley, 2022). Therefore, community engagement strengthens ethical and scientific

rigor by ensuring that measures, interpretations, and recommendations accurately reflect lived experience, reducing misclassification and increasing ecological validity (Collins et al., 2018; Jackson & Moorley, 2022).

Furthermore, research that does not intentionally and thoughtfully use community-engaged practices throughout the research process can pose significant risks and harms to marginalized communities. Anti-transgender rhetoric and propaganda have recently increased. Notably, and of grave concern, TGD-focused research has been weaponized and politicized to enact transphobic policies and to remove access to gender-affirming care (Billard, 2024; Garofalo, 2023; Lepore et al., 2022). We acknowledge that, given the practice of scientific misinformation, it may be impossible to entirely prevent these outcomes. Nonetheless, ensuring that applicable research involves TGD people in substantive roles can prevent some of these occurrences, for instance, by ensuring research questions are framed with lived experience in mind, avoiding using and/or publishing transphobic language in study design and manuscripts, and ensuring research findings are properly contextualized in models that acknowledge transphobic experiences or transphobic stressors.

Requiring transparency in research of community-engaged practices

Given the importance of community engagement, it should be required for authors to clearly indicate whether or not community engagement was implemented. Voluntary reporting is inherently inconsistent, with researchers who use community-engaged practices most likely to report and researchers who do not use these practices are unlikely to explicitly acknowledge the lack of community-engagement. Therefore, without a standardized requirement, transparency is inconsistent across submissions, undermining the reviewers' ability to consistently evaluate ethical and methodological rigor. Instead, journals like the International Journal of Transgender Health should require specific statements about community engagement when research is first submitted for publication.

Omitting information about community engagement (or lack thereof) in applicable publications creates numerous dilemmas for individuals reviewing or referring to this work. Reviewers and readers must be able to easily identify whether TGD people were engaged in any

aspects of the research process (beyond providing their data for analyses) to fully evaluate the ethics and rigor of the work. Ethically, a lack of meaningful community involvement has the propensity to contribute to the exploitation and pathologization of marginalized communities within research contexts, a harm that frequently impacts TGD individuals (Asquith et al., 2021; Vincent, 2018). Scientifically, research that lacks community engagement can misrepresent, misunderstand, and/or overlook nuances of analytic findings, especially when the researchers do not identify with the community they are studying (Asquith et al., 2021). Such omissions also perpetuate longstanding epistemic injustices in TGD health research, in which those most impacted by the work have historically had the least influence over how findings are framed, interpreted, or applied (Asquith et al., 2021). Therefore, a lack of information about community-engagement requires readers to make problematic assumptions about the research methods and ethics, conclusions, and potential impact.

Many journals already require authors to submit statements addressing core research principles for review and publication. For instance, as part of the open science movement, explicit statements about preregistration and data availability (or lack thereof) are required upon submission, which are later published alongside the work. Rather than including statements only when open science practices are adopted, researchers must explicitly state when they did not implement them (and, in some cases, justify). These reporting practices are grounded in research demonstrating the absence of information is interpreted differently from a clear indication a recommended practice was not implemented (Schneider et al., 2022). Likewise, some journals dedicated to the health and well-being of marginalized groups are beginning to enforce researcher positionality statements, either within or alongside submitted manuscripts, to help readers contextualize the presented findings. Analogously, requiring a clear indication of whether and how community-engaged practices were used will provide essential information to reviewers and readers evaluating the work.

Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, we propose that the journal (and others) adopt an open science mindset for community-based research by requiring explicit reporting of these practices in TGD-related research. The implementation can be relatively streamlined, requiring authors to provide specific information about whether and how they included community-engaged practices (e.g. checkboxes or description with template language) to be included in the review process and final publication. This requirement imposes minimal additional burden. Beyond increasing transparency of the contributors to the research and community-involvement, recognizing community-engaged practices will promote the work of

researchers adopting these practices. Further, implementing such a standard will explicitly signal to researchers, readership, and the broader community that the journal values community engagement, which could incentivize broader adoption. We encourage the International Journal of Transgender Health to take on a leadership role by further strengthening their community-engaged standards for TGD-focused research, thereby setting a new precedent for research in the TGD health field.

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