

Giving Voice to Rural Communities' Mental Health Needs Through the Delphi Method

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Abstract

The Delphi method is a structured method for decision-making, which is usually carried out by surveying a panel of experts (Skulmoski et al., 2007). However, a modified version of the Delphi method can also be used in an in-person, small group context which is considered in this article. Utilization of the Delphi method as dependable research tool has extensive studies that testify to its veracity. This is especially true when used to seek an opinion as well as develop some level of consensus among a specific and targeted group of individuals who form an expert panel. In a pilot study conducted in South Texas, we reconceptualized rural community members as experts in their own mental health needs and utilized a modified, in person Delphi method with them. This is a novel contribution to the literature as Delphi has not previous been used in this way or with this conceptualization. This article will review the unique byproduct of the Delphi method that encourages, enhances, and provides voice for those rural/remote communities addressing community needs and solutions.

The Delphi method is a research technique that, through a structured communication or structured decision-making technique, seeks to identify a consensus within a selected panel of experts to determine what the particular insights of these experts may reveal. The 'traditional'

Delphi method involves the repeated questioning of a panel of expertise, usually through a questionnaire-type format, this is interspersed with opportunities for feedback and the revision of views, ultimately working towards a consensus view (de Meyrick, 2003). According to Willems et al. (2015), the Delphi method can facilitate change thus affording a community to the opportunity to mobilize community assets and resources. Niederberger and Spranger (2020) maintain the Delphi method is “highly relevant in health science studies” (p. 2). It has been used innovatively in this field by Fletcher and Marchildon (2014) in combination with participatory action research in the area of health leadership. One of the attractive qualities of the Delphi method is that it can be conducted in a face-to-face session or a virtual setting as a modified or mini-Delphi. The questions are provided to the participants in a circulating manner and with each subsequent round, the feedback eventually results in a collective agreement of responses. We have found that this process, in fact, creates positive synergy that includes providing participants with feelings of being heard and subsequently respected.

Background of the Need for Voice in Rural Communities Regarding Mental Health

Research and policy briefs related to mental health within rural communities have long concluded the stark reality of the missing voices of these underserved and underrepresented populations in different geographical settings (National Rural Health Association Policy Brief, 2015). Kozhimannil and Henning-Smith (2019) maintain the importance of hearing from rural peoples regarding needs, disparities, resources, programs, and policies related to rural mental health. According to the U.S. Drug Administration (2020), the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy asserts hearing from the people of the rural community allows them “to express their collective voice on issues of common concern, respond to community-identified recovery support needs, and provide a forum for recovery-focused community service” (p. 79). According to the Health and Human Services Commission (2020), the *All Texas Access Report* affirmed the utmost importance of local mental health and behavioral health agencies seeking “to engage members of diverse groups of racial and ethnic populations and social and economic stratifications, to include voices from communities most impacted by these mental health disparities (p. 13). Johnson (2020) discussed the importance of voice and being heard as regular themes in her research related to the future of work trends impacted by COVID-19. In their study, Petiwala et al. (2021) supported the positive impact of active community voice on improving health outcomes. From an international perspective, Farmer et al. (2020) focused on the “hidden voices” of rural peoples in Australia arguing the utilization of online forum data “gives people living all across Australia access to providing a voice and informing policy and practice decision-making” (p. 40). 2017 was the first time that Scotland’s rural population had been surveyed about mental health, highlighting that rural communities are experts in their own needs (Skerratt, 2017). The NRHA policy brief (2015) listed four obstacles for rural people receiving mental health services: availability, accessibility, affordability, and acceptability. These issues are exacerbated when rural populations do not believe they are being heard on local, state, or federal legislative levels.

Overview of the Delphi Method’s Emphasis on Giving Voice

Just before the COVID-19 pandemic restricted travel in south Texas, the primary author,

along with graduate students, conducted a community-needs assessment (CNA) utilizing the Delphi method (Bain, 2018). While this article will not review that particular study, it is the import of this writing to highlight the potential of the Delphi method to provide an avenue for voice within and for rural communities. It was the experience of this first author that the Delphi method provided an opportunity for participants in a rural mental health community to be heard.

Utilizing the Delphi method has been shown to increase the voice of the people being surveyed. Howarth et al. (2019) utilized the Delphi method to identify needs for community-based child and young people (CYP) mental health services in East England. They gathered information from both public and professional groups. It was during the discussion of “divergence of priorities” that the importance and import of voice became clear.

In general, there was good agreement between public and professionals; however we identified a subset of service features that were highly valued by members of the public but relatively less so by professionals. This finding concurs with the current strong emphasis on involving CYP and families in the design of services to ensure they are acceptable and effective for those who will use them. (Howarth et al., 2019, p. 13)

Jorm (2015) concluded the Delphi method is a viable alternative to research methods that are more experimental in nature and has led to the development of a variety of evidence-based mental health interventions. The emphasis here is that the voice of the participants must be heard. McCarthy et al. (2021) developed a community needs assessment based on the Delphi method. For these researchers, the process helped them “develop and content-validate a community assessment survey for rural white, rural Latinx, and rural AI/AN ADRD family caregivers that focuses on needs, as well as culturally-based strengths, assets, and resources” (p. 132). They argue the importance of securing input through stakeholder engagement as this will ensure the highest quality research that can lead to positive change within rural communities. When reviewing this article, it is obviously clear that the participants felt they had a significant role in determining how the community assessment survey was designed which further emphasizes the power of voice for rural community members.

Challenges Potentially Impacting Voice Using the Delphi Method

Utilizing the Delphi Method is an effective research tool in that it can develop a consensus of ideas that may be used as both a means of assessing and implementing solutions to a problem (Howarth et al., 2019). It also is typically utilized when dealing “with questions that are closely related to practice needs” (Jorm, 2015, p. 894). In spite of the myriad of positive applications of the Delphi Method, some key considerations may affect the force or import of voice for participants. The Delphi Method is best employed when confidentiality can be maintained and the “wisdom of the crowd” affect is not negatively impacted (Davis-Stober et al. (2014). Judgments within a group can be altered if the group participants know what others are thinking. Jorm (2015) argued the definition of “consensus” is a challenge partly because of the complexity of communicating accurately the results of the various rounds of feedback. Howarth et al. (2019) found that recruiting large and diverse panels could be impacted by either over-representation or under-representation of identified experts. Niederberger and Spranger (2020) discussed five potential challenges to supporting voice through the Delphi Method:

1) no uniformity for a definition of consensus, 2) difficulty in understanding the objectives of the method when new variants of the method are employed, 3) guidelines for identifying types of experts is often vague, 4) reliability is impacted by low numbers of experts serving on the panels, and 5) little information is given on “developing and monitoring the questionnaires. (p. 457)

An older study by Owens et al. (2008) found that “disadvantages of the technique include potential attrition between rounds, absence of the stimulation and cross-fertilization of ideas that occur when people meet face to face, and the possibility that anonymity may encourage carelessness” (p. 420). Mitigation of these factors seemed to include confidentiality, a clear review of the instructions, and a focus on the purpose of the studies conducted.

Conclusion

In spite of the aforementioned challenges, the reality is the Delphi Method is a trusted and reliable research method particularly in the area of social sciences. The Delphi Method supports the notion that crowds can be wise (Jorm, 2015). The method also brings communities together for the consideration of both individual and collective voice thus complimenting underserved communities and populations. Niederberger and Spranger (2020) argue the efficacy of the Delphi Method in assuring the validity of the findings because of the cognitive diversity it generates. It is the opinion of these authors that the Delphi Method can be used as an integral research methodology particularly as it encourages, enhances, and promotes voice among underrepresented populations, particularly in rural and remote settings. We have seen that this is a potentially powerful tool in the particular area of giving voice to rural residents’ understandings of mental health.

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