

FORCED BONDING OR COMMUNITY COLLABORATION?

Partnerships between science and practice in research on woman battering

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This paper explores factors contributing to successful collaborations between practitioners and researchers studying the impact of adult domestic violence and the effectiveness of services aimed at stopping it. The paper identifies potential challenges to research partnerships and, through interviews with the researchers and practitioners from four successful collaborations, highlights strategies for effectively navigating these challenges. It concludes by arguing that collaborative partnerships between science and practice communities strengthen the process of scientific inquiry and program development.

Social scientists and practitioners alike know of the frantic search for letters of support as grant deadlines approach. From the community perspective, calls and letters from academicians seeking their agency's last-minute support for research funding in amounts that often exceed their agency budgets are met with a mixture of anger and fear. They are angry that they were not included in the design and development of the research questions or methods and fearful these researchers will use tremendous staff resources to collect data, never to be heard from again. Practitioners may also fear the research will compromise the safety of battered women and their children by publishing their results. Many social scientists also resent the expectation that community organizations act in partnership in research endeavors. It is sometimes viewed as one extra hurdle required by funders with very short deadlines. Such requirements are sometimes seen as compromising the independence of scientific inquiry and are often not taken seriously by the scientific community. These tensions have led one advocate to reframe collaboration as "forced bonding."

The issues that arise when scientific and practice communities attempt to collaborate on research and evaluation projects have been the subject of discussion and publications for over fifty years. One of the earliest and most frequently cited is Lewin's (1946) article describing action research. Models expanding on these ideas have been proposed in a variety of disciplines over the intervening decades. Among these variations are participatory research (Park, et. al., 1993), participatory action research (Kondrat & Julia, 1997; Meis, 1996), collaborative inquiry (Torbert, 1981), co-operative inquiry (Reason, 1994), feminist research (Gergen, 1988; Reinharz, 1992) and multicultural research (Uehara et al., 1996).

In research on woman battering, similar calls have been made for a movement toward a collaborative research model that serves battered women. A decade ago, Hart (1988) outlined strategies for collaboration between researchers and advocates. Eisikovits and Peled (1990) and Dobash and Dobash (1990) have called for greater use of qualitative methods that often reflect a collaborative stance. More recently, Gondolf, Yllo and Campbell (1997) described a collaborative model of advocacy research in domestic violence.

The term "collaborative research" is used here to describe investigative partnerships and shared control of the research process between advocates, practitioners, social scientists, community activists, and women who have been battered.

Potential challenges to research partnerships are detailed in the following text and may partially explain the scarcity of collaborative relationships. Strategies are highlighted for successfully navigating the challenges presented by collaborative partnerships. In summary, we concluded by arguing that collaborative partnerships between science and practice communities strengthen rather than weaken the process of scientific inquiry and program development.

Advocates, practitioners, and researchers involved in four successful collaborative research and evaluation projects on woman battering were interviewed in preparation for writing this paper (see full article for a description of these projects). Throughout this paper we will draw on the experiences of these four successful collaborations and from the published literature.

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Challenges to Collaborative Research Partnerships

We begin by addressing the barriers to conducting collaborative research. These barriers help to explain why such partnerships are relatively rare. A number of authors and individuals we interviewed identified several challenges, including those related to shared control of the research process, time and trust, differences between disciplines, and skills of the researcher.

Sharing Control of the Research Process

Perhaps the most prevalent framework supporting interventions to reduce or end woman battering is one that places power and control as the central driving force behind violent behavior (see Pence & Paymar, 1993). It is not surprising, therefore, that program staff expect power and control to be equally shared in the research process. Researchers may be concerned that this degree of collaboration will compromise the integrity of research designs (Galinsky, et. al., 1993; Gondolf et al., 1997) and some funding agencies question researchers' independence when they are actively and closely involved with the program being evaluated. At the same time, some practitioners hesitate to collaborate on research projects out of fear that potentially negative evaluation results will harm their program's funding or reputation (Ford, 1995; Gondolf et al., 1997; Myers & Daly, 1997; Riger, 1997).

Time and Trust

Another challenge of collaborative research is the intensive time commitment required by all involved. Differences in disciplinary values, race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and professional experience all impact the time it takes to build trust in relationships (Hart, 1988; Renzetti, 1997).

Time is a tension-filled issue. Researchers generally have more time than practitioners to devote to a research project because it is a recognized and rewarded part of their jobs. Practitioners, on the other hand, are seldom offered rewards for participating in research or publishing manuscripts and usually fit work on a research project into their already full days.

Beyond these time pressures, both practitioners and researchers may be distrustful of each other's motives. Practitioners are concerned that interview questions will unnecessarily reactivate emotional trauma about battering, blame victims, or compromise women's safety or that research protocol will substantially alter services to the detriment of clients. As stated earlier, researchers may not trust the ability of practitioners to understand or be helpful in designing a sufficiently rigorous study.

Differences Between Disciplines

Practitioners and researchers bring different skills, training, and experience to the collaboration. This is both a source of strength and a potential point of conflict. Researchers, advocates, and battered women may have different views on the relative value of empirical and experiential knowledge (Hart, 1988). If they remain unexplored, different perspectives, terminology, methods, interpretations, and concerns may lead to misunderstanding and perpetuate feelings of fear and mistrust among collaborative partners (Gondolf et al., 1997; Hart, 1988).

Further, differences in race, class, gender, and sexual orientation may add to differences in professional credentials between researchers, practitioners, and battered women and reinforce power in traditional ways (Hart, 1988). These differences may fuel mistrust and miscommunication between collaborative partners if unacknowledged.

Skills of the Researcher

The challenges identified above may well destroy attempts at collaborative research if left unresolved or unanswered. Many researchers have an excellent command of scientific methods but fail miserably in their ability to be an effective part of an interpersonal and interagency network of relationships.

Successful Collaborative Ventures

Researchers and practitioners have outlined keys to the success of their collaborative ventures which point to a set of underlying assumptions and best practices. Individually, the strategies identified below may look rather ordinary. Uehara et al. (1996) suggest that research projects become truly collaborative when strategies such as these are organic to the entire research endeavor. When taken together, these assumptions and strategies create a very different experience for the social scientist as well as the practitioner. They are likely to significantly affect every aspect of scientific inquiry, from initial problem and question formulation to the way the results are presented and disseminated.

Three basic underlying assumptions that commonly appear in published accounts of collaborative research were voiced by the individuals we interviewed for this paper. These include using woman-centered advocacy as a metaphor for the research process, viewing both researchers and those studied as equal partners in the research enterprise, and assuming that research is value-based. After reviewing these underlying assumptions we will then identify concrete actions that bring life to these assumptions in the research process.

Agencies with Collaborating Researchers:

- 1) The Community Advocacy Project and Cris Sullivan - Michigan
- 2) The Domestic Abuse Project and Jeff Edleson - Minneapolis
- 3) The African American Task Force on Violence Against Women and Beth Richie - New York
- 4) Texas Battered Women's Shelters and Ed Gondolf - Texas

1) Advocacy as a Metaphor for the Research Process.

Literature on woman-centered advocacy, literature on collaborative research, as well as interviews with collaborators, define successful collaborative research as shared decision-making power between researcher and practitioner that results in practitioners' questions becoming research projects. The skills of the collaborative researcher include listening to the needs of practitioners and battered women; providing adequate information about the research project so that collaborative partners can make informed decisions about their involvement; and going forward with what the community partners want. Underlying these skills is an expectation that the researcher is there to learn from women who have been battered, and a view that the program staff, volunteers, and community members are equal partners in the collaboration (Hall, 1981; Kondrat & Julia, 1997).

2) Blurring the Line Between Researcher and Those Studied.

If researchers adopt a woman-centered or practitioner-centered approach to research, the traditional line between who is the researcher and who is the client, advocate, or practitioner is often blurred. These researchers take the questions, ideas, and strategies of advocates, battered women, and community members and make them central to the research study. Further, such researchers are immersed in the advocacy community and function as advocates in addition to researchers, serving in volunteer or administrative positions, on boards of directors, or as activists within the larger community.

When a project is fully collaborative, all involved function as "co-researchers" and engage in reciprocal learning with one another. The active involvement of battered women, advocates, and community members bring knowledge based in practical and life-experiences, as well as critical analyses that are crucial to the project. Everyone's expertise and contributions are valued equally.

3) A Value-Based Science in Service to Social Change.

Many authors promoting models of collaborative research reject the traditional notion that research is value-free. Rather, they argue that all researchers bring a specific set of values to the enterprise (Kondrat & Julia, 1997; Meis, 1996). These values are viewed as playing a major role in every stage of the research process, affecting the selection of a problem and research question, design of the study, definition and measurement of variables, and interpretation and dissemination of the results (Dobash & Dobash, 1990; Eisikovits & Peled, 1990). Collaborative research models call on researchers to make explicit their value orientation rather than assert they are value-free (Small, 1995).

Uehara et al. (1996) argue that research "objectives should be linked to community empowerment, social justice, and social transformation goals" (p. 614). Carol Arthur of the Domestic Abuse Project (DAP, Minneapolis, MN) described one of the benefits of doing collaborative research as "creating a culture where we're constantly asking if what we're doing is effective".

Strategies for Collaboration

- **Provide equal access to funding**

Sharing control of the budget is crucial to recognizing community agencies as equal partners in the collaborative research process. Practitioners and their agencies should be fairly compensated for their participation and agreements should be developed in advance.

- **Involve survivors of woman battering and their advocates in research projects from the beginning**

Collaboration throughout the research process will increase the likelihood that relevant research questions are asked, safety risks are identified, effective strategies for improving response rates and minimizing attrition are identified, outcome variables are identified, and result interpretations are validated.

- **Identify incentives for all parties**

The sharing of expertise contained in the collaborative effort should offer tangible benefits to all participants. This helps to ensure commitment and dispel feelings of mistrust or fear of exploitation. Results of collaborative research can be used by agencies to write grants, improve services, and better understand the experiences of battered women and their children.

- **Make research products useful**

Small (1995) argues that research products must be made available to and useful for research partners if we are to truly fulfill the mission of collaborative research. Results can be disseminated via training manuals, newsletters and press releases, as well as community presentations. At least one agency has experienced the appreciation of funders, policy makers, and other practitioners for their willingness to share findings, even when those findings suggested a different approach than the agency was currently taking.

- **Establish on-going communication** Effective communication begins with all parties exploring their objectives, assumptions, roles, limits, and concerns. Suggestions for maintaining clear and on-going communications include:

- 1) *Be purposeful about roles in the research process;*
- 2) *Be flexible in problem solving;*
- 3) *Spend time together in each others' domain and in neutral ones.*

How is Science Enhanced Through Collaboration with Practice?

Effective partnerships between researchers and practitioners enhance the research process and facilitate social change:

Improved Research Questions

One of the most significant benefits of collaborating on domestic violence research is that the inquiry is often far more relevant to the lives of battered women. Adopting research questions that are generated from battered women and their advocates also sets a precedent of valuing the expertise that these collaborators bring to a research project, which helps balance other possible power differentials. Further, collaboration is more likely to generate multiple outcome measures that more accurately reflect the complexity of battered women's lives (Gondolf et al., 1997).

Enhanced Research Implementation

Collaborative projects are more likely to collect information in ways that do not compromise the safety or confidentiality of participants by paying attention to the timing, format, and location of interviews and surveys (Gondolf et al., 1997). They may also lead to the creation of more effective retention strategies for longitudinal studies by consulting with battered women regarding effective incentives and contact methods.

When professionals with different training and experience collectively direct their energies toward the same outcome, the process is often synergetic. Battered women and advocates are valuable interpreters and validators of research results. They can also provide valuable insight regarding how to modify research instruments for various populations (Riger, 1997). Researchers are trained in scientific methods and data analysis and can help link the experiences of battered women to the theoretical contributions of existing research on violence

against women. When researchers, practitioners, and battered women together apply their complementary talents, their collective efforts can often reach underserved populations in more effective ways than if they had worked independently.

Enhanced Legitimacy and Utilization

Associations with domestic violence programs often afford researchers access to data to which they would not otherwise have access. Practitioners may also benefit from the credibility that researchers contribute to a project through researchers' careful attention to the scientific rigor of the research design, data collection, and interpretation.

Enhanced Accountability to Battered Women and Their Advocates

When collaborators share power in the research process, it may reflect a commitment to social change. The results of research are more likely to be trusted and utilized by advocates and other practitioners to improve services focused on enhancing the safety of battered women and holding perpetrators accountable.

Connection to Social Movement

Practitioners may find that collaborating on a research project can lead to increased exposure to the national battered women's movement and can expand advocates' understanding of issues concerning battered women and their children. Researchers may also benefit from being connected to the larger movement to end violence against women as a result of collaborating with advocates and battered women. In one of the collaboratives studied for this article, the researcher stated that his work grounded him in the political issues surrounding the field and pointed him toward research that affected public policy issues. The practitioner described the project as a "life-transforming experience" that broadened her thinking and analysis of how to make a difference in the lives of battered women.

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