

Building A Research Team: The Struggle to Link the Community and the Academy

Baukje (Bo) Miedema

*and the Members of the Research Team¹ on
Family Violence in Immigrant Communities in New Brunswick*

ABSTRACT

When a research team of community and academic members was formed to study issues of family violence in immigrant communities, the team found that although in theory the "academy" is encouraged to work with the "community", in reality structural barriers make this cooperation difficult.

RÉSUMÉ

Lors de la formation d'une équipe de recherche composée de membres de la communauté et d'universitaires qui s'est créée afin d'étudier la question de la violence familiale dans des communautés d'immigrés, l'équipe a découvert que bien qu'en théorie on encourage les universitaires à travailler avec la communauté, en pratique des obstacles de structure compliquent cette coopération.

INTRODUCTION

In 1992 a group of researchers from the University of New Brunswick was successful in securing one of the five federally funded family violence research centers in Canada. The centre is called the Muriel McQueen-Fergusson Family Violence Research Centre (Centre). The goal of the Centre "is to undertake research which will offer practical, action oriented ways to help end family violence." To achieve this goal the Centre wants to carry out research in cooperation with the community. Each research project is directed by a

multidisciplinary team "comprised of academic researchers and representatives from community based organizations and government." The Centre is not unique in encouraging such community involvement; many funding agencies encourage a partnership between community and academic researchers. In this paper I will discuss some of the difficulties that can be encountered in the process of creating such a partnership. Although these difficulties are specific to one research team, I believe that our experiences are not unique. It is very important that barriers hindering true partnership between the

university and the community are understood and resolved, otherwise I fear that community groups will withdraw their support for joint research projects because they will see the process as one of exploitation in which their expertise is appropriated while they receive little in return.

BACKGROUND

The research team on family violence in immigrant communities in New Brunswick grew out of a community group's interest. When the Centre was established, the members of the community group *Women Working with Immigrant Women* (WWIW) were interested in having research carried out in the area of family violence and immigrant women. At that time I was, and still am, very involved with WWIW, but I was also a Ph.D. student in the Sociology Department of the University of New Brunswick.² This dual role provided me with a unique perspective on the process of community-academic collaboration. My own situation also reminds us that while in this paper I will refer to team members as either academics or community people, the two groups are not in fact closed and mutually exclusive categories.

After the Centre was awarded to the University of New Brunswick, members of WWIW were "waiting" for an academic to initiate a research team to examine family violence in the immigrant community in New Brunswick. However, no academic came forward. Thus in the fall of 1993 the paid part-time coordinator of WWIW and I decided, with the encouragement and support of the acting director of the Centre, to form a Research Team on Family Violence in the Immigrant Community in New Brunswick

(Team).

We felt strongly about a number of issues. For example, we believed the Team should have a balance between community group members and academic researchers, and between immigrant and non-immigrant women. We also wanted immigrant women from cities other than Fredericton on the Team. So we started to formulate some general ideas of what we would like to research and began to invite immigrant women from various regions of New Brunswick to participate on the Team. After the Team had formulated some preliminary research objectives, academic researchers from diverse faculties (economics, sociology, and nursing), and a front-line worker in the women's shelter movement, joined. Although the academics were not immigrants themselves, they had a good personal knowledge of the issues facing immigrant women. As a Team, a considerable amount of time was spent on Team building. However, soon the structural problems of keeping the Team together began to emerge.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO PARTNERSHIP

Two Team members lived in communities other than Fredericton and they had to travel to attend meetings. These two Team members found it increasingly difficult to combine the demands of paid work and family responsibilities with the demands of the Team meetings. They left the Team. Two other immigrant women, both also from outside Fredericton, joined. Soon we ran into the same problems.

Slowly the structural problems hindering the ability of community members to attend meetings became apparent to us. Although not

living in Fredericton created problems (extra time and money was needed for travel), the most important problems for these Team members were difficulties of combining the demands of paid employment and the demands of the Team. The situation of academic Team members was quite different. They had flexible working schedules and, furthermore, attending these meetings was considered part of their regular work. Thus in reality, for some time, the Team meetings had more academic women attending than immigrant women. Although we tried to communicate by phone, fax and mail with the Team members outside Fredericton, it was not a satisfactory process for the Team members individually and the Team as a whole. As a result, three immigrant women left the Team (for another reason one academic also left). Since that time, two immigrant women from Fredericton have joined the Team, as well as an immigrant academic. The Team thus once again includes significant representation from immigrant women; however, representation of regional and rural immigrant women has suffered.

The second barrier we encountered was even more formidable. As a Research Team, we had received a "seed" grant of \$5,000. However, the co-coordinator and I were not eligible for signing authority over an account at the University of New Brunswick. The University of New Brunswick will only allow faculty members to have signing authority. This regulation was enforced in spite of the fact that as the coordinator and chair of WWIW, we, the co-coordinators of the Research Team had been responsible for administering more than \$150,000 in grant money for WWIW over the last eight years. It was necessary for two academic Team

members (reluctantly) to become the signing officers on behalf of the Team. In reality it does not matter if Team member A or Team member B has the signing authority on an account; however, the symbolic value of the university's rule is very powerful and gives community members a clear message.

A third barrier the Team encountered that hindered a true partnership between the community and the academy was related to our dealings with funding agencies. The first issue here was that most funding agencies require that principal investigators be designated on grant applications. We were opposed to setting up hierarchies in this way, since all Team members are equally involved in the project. Further, such funding agency regulations privilege academic participants, since principal investigators must be academics. Thus on our application to the Department of Canadian Heritage two academic women were denoted as the principal investigators.

A fourth major barrier we encountered was the review process of the application. The review process made it very clear that the experience and expertise of community team members do not matter. Two application reviewers commented that the principal investigator did not have expertise in the area in which we wanted to do research. One reviewer stated: "... difficulties arise... [because] of the principal applicant's lack of any ethnic studies publication record". The expertise of the community members, particularly the ones who had worked with immigrant women and were immigrant women themselves, was completely ignored, even though all team members' resumes were included in the application. The other

reviewer, who was in favor of the project albeit with reduced funding, stated "the majority of the applicants have no ethnic studies track records." It is true that the majority of Team members did not have a publication record; however, the community representatives live "ethnicity" daily and have spent much of their volunteer time in this area.

This kind of expertise is defined as irrelevant within the academic review process.

We stated in the proposal that the research participants should have a large degree of control over the research process. Based on this, one reviewer commented: "If the authors want the subjects [we never used that word] to control the research, then the women themselves should apply. Why have middle class academics applied?" This comment ignored the structural constraints that required that academics be designated principal investigators. By ignoring the role of other Team members this comment also damaged Team morale, especially amongst community members. The years of volunteer community involvement by immigrant women for immigrant women represented on the Team were devalued by this statement.

Our experience reveals that structural barriers make it almost impossible to have a true partnership between community and academic researchers. Funding agencies and other institutions are quick to use the term "community" involvement. Perhaps they see community involvement as a means of drawing volunteer labour into the research process. It is clear that they are not willing to make structural changes to facilitate a real partnership between the two groups.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

First, it is important to realize that partnership research between the academy and the community is very different in character than traditional academic research. Academic members and community members have to share their different kinds of knowledge with each other. The philosophical differences between community groups (wanting to see more immediate results) and academic partners (wanting to collect more data) can create problems. Time is needed to discuss the most basic issues, to consider the perspective of the other, and to create harmony. This process is absolutely crucial for a successful partnership. Thus partnership research projects are, by definition, more time consuming and therefore a more expensive process.

Secondly, university infrastructures and research funding agencies have to understand the nature of partnership research. They must help to make it possible for community members to become full-fledged partners, not just token participants. The division of labour in a research team should be determined by the team, not by bureaucratic rules of the university or funding agency.

Thirdly, academic researchers have to understand their own privileged (relative to the community members) working conditions and recognize the barriers faced by women who have less privileged working conditions. Accommodations must be made so that community members can be compensated for their time, travel, mileage and or baby-sitting costs. The difference between academic and community members on a research team is not located at the personal level but at the level of access to structures that facilitate research.

These differences have to be addressed and discussed up-front when a partnership between the community and academics is being developed.

CONCLUSION

If a true research partnership is going to be developed between community organizations and the academy, community group members have to be taken seriously and the barriers identified above have to be overcome. Furthermore, a research partnership between the community and the academy should not be seen as a "cost saving measure" but as a research process that is extremely valuable in its own right. In fact, it must be recognized that due to the particular issues involved in community/academic research, such research will probably cost more instead of less.

The struggles of our research team are ongoing. The positive aspects of our struggle, however, are that these issues have been made into discussion points among academics. The first step to change is awareness. For example, the Director of the Centre is attempting to raise these issues in her discussions with various funding agencies and the university administration. Conditions must change, and barriers be removed, if the university and the community are to work together for real social change.

ENDNOTES

1. America Laverty, Joan McFarland, Roxana Ng (advisor), Imgard Stehlmann, Sandy Wachholz, Debrah Westerburg, Judy Wuest.
2. I have recently graduated but I do not have a faculty position.