

Community-Research Collaborations in Rape Prevention

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I joined the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS), Rape Prevention and Education Program (RPEP) in August 2005. My primary responsibilities include providing research support and online resources to the Contractors who provide direct rape prevention and education presentations/workshops in Arizona. During the last couple of months, I have often thought about how I can improve my work for RPEP, including increasing the use of available research services by the Contractors. This led me to think about how researchers and community providers can work together to prevent sexual violence. I wondered about the different ways that we can learn from each other and benefit from each other's areas of expertise. I thought I might find some answers by reviewing the current body of literature on community collaborations. Given that the success of such collaborations depends on the involvement and investment of all parties, I thought that a brief article on this topic might be useful for everyone who works on RPEP. In this article, I highlight some of the major issues regarding community collaborations, including advantages, obstacles, and strategies for development, and apply them to rape prevention and education.

What is Community-Based Research?

- A process where community members, program providers, and researchers are all viewed as experts and work together through each stage of the research project (Kelly, 1988).
- Different stages include identifying the research questions, designing and administering assessment tools, implementing the program, interpreting the findings, and disseminating the findings to different audiences (Baker, Homan, Schonhoff, & Krueter, 1999).
- Many fields encourage collaborations to address major social and public health problems.

Does it Exist in the Sexual Violence Field?

- There is growing interest in developing collaborations to reduce violence against women, but most of the emphasis is on domestic violence and intervention research (Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001).
- Research partnerships for sexual violence prevention remain rare.

What are the Advantages of Community-Based Research in Rape Prevention?

- *Research is more responsive to the community.* Researchers obtain more information about the needs, values, and experiences of the community (Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001), including communities that are typically underrepresented in studies.
- *Increases accessibility of research findings to communities.*
- *Promotes the use of data.* Findings on prevalence rates of rape, risk factors, and effective prevention strategies are used in real world settings.
- *Direct benefits to rape prevention providers and agencies.* The goal of community-based evaluation studies is to provide agencies with results that will be useful for their programs.
- *Enhanced research skills and knowledge of the current literature.* Rape prevention providers receive training that may result in improvements in curriculum development and evaluation.

What are Common Obstacles?

- *Lack of resources faced by community agencies.* Due to limited funding, many agencies focus more attention to service delivery than evaluation and other research efforts (Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001). Funding for research on sexual violence prevention is also scarce and competitive.
- *Lack of accessibility of guidelines on developing collaborations.* Most guidelines are published in scientific journals and thus, target an academic audience. Community providers are largely dependent on researchers to initiate collaborative projects (Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001).

- *Different goals and values among researchers and program providers.* Researchers typically want to improve understanding or test specific theories, whereas community providers seek to improve the lives of the individuals they work with (Wandersman, 2003). As a result, researchers have a tendency to exert greater control over a collaborative project, sometimes failing to take into account the unique characteristics of a program in the research design.
- *Unequal roles and lack of mutual respect among collaborators.* If disagreements persist, a project will probably fail or produce few useful findings. Parties will feel dissatisfied and will be less likely to engage in research collaborations in the future.

What are Some Possible Solutions?

- *Develop small-scale research collaborations.* Shapiro and Rinaldi (2001) provide a good example of a small-scale evaluation of a rape prevention education program. Although the study design was relatively simple, it produced results that led to significant revisions of the program curriculum.
- *Develop large collaborative projects when resources are available.*
- *Identify the goals of the project and roles of each party as early as possible.* Increase efficiency by matching the goals and roles with areas of expertise and available resources.
- *Create relationships that are respectful, flexible, and have open communication (Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001).* Select researchers and community providers that share similar values. Specific to the rape prevention area, select researchers that are committed to philosophies of empowerment, activism, and feminism (Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2003).
- *Increase accessibility of the community collaboration literature.* This may be accomplished by projects that translate and disseminate partnership models and findings to rape prevention providers.
- *Involve advocates and policymakers to increase funding.* Whereas it might be feasible to conduct small collaborations with few funds, large-scale projects require more money for greater involvement by community agencies and educational institutions. Ideal projects would include collaborators from across the country. Funds are also necessary to sustain the improved practices that are identified as a result of the collaborative projects.

Concluding Remarks

This brief overview suggests that community-research collaborations for rape prevention and education are challenging, but feasible. I hope this article will encourage discussions on this topic among the RPEP Contractors, Program Manager (Carol Hensell), and me. By reducing the gap between research and practice, we will be able to develop and implement the most effective rape prevention and education services to our communities in Arizona.

References and Recommended Readings

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