"You'll Have to Work to Overcome Our Suspicions"

The Benefits and Pitfalls of Research with Community Organizations

Douglas D. Perkins and Abraham Wandersman

Each group (researchers and practitioners) expressed desire to work with the other, along with a distinct wariness, lest the price of working together be too high. Practitioners wanted the guidance they believed research could provide but not the disruption they feared it could produce. Many of the suggestions made by practitioners to researchers for facilitating research access. . . dealt with issues of trust. One felicitously phrased bit of advice from a practitioner to a researcher was: "Be prepared to aggressively demonstrate reliability." A rough translation might be: "You'll have to work to overcome our suspicions."

As for the research people, they spoke of the need for access and, if possible, support. Some research people worried about what would have to be exchanged to gain access and support. Technical assistance and making results available would be all right, perhaps, but control over methods and over dissemination might be too much to trade away.

—Robert S. Weiss [1]

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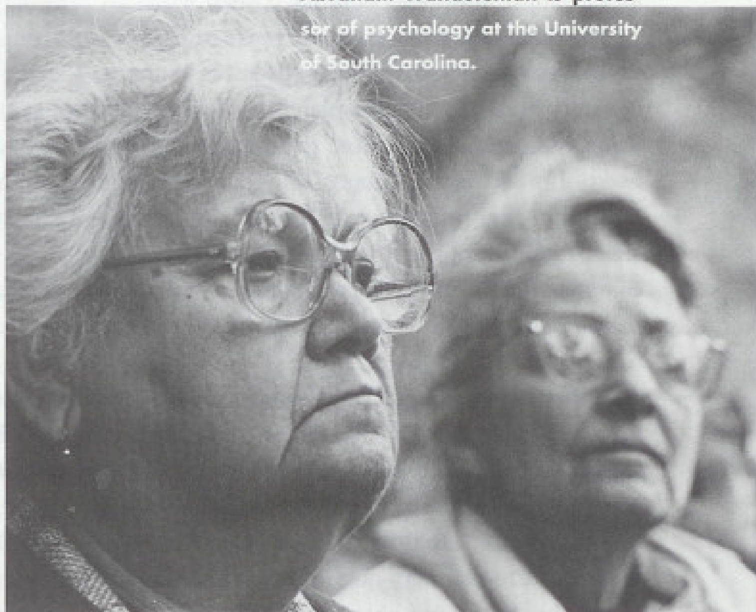

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The different role constraints of practitioners (including community leaders, organizers, and agency staff) on one hand and researchers on the other hand create certain basic value conflicts between them. A good practitioner must often act immediately in a confounded

and changing political environment, identify and mobilize resources to achieve a specific goal, solve complex problems, and make judgments based on the sometimes limited information at hand. The scientist is trained to randomize selection and assignment of cases and treat them "blindly" when necessary, to isolate variables and to hold conditions constant, to test and refine hypotheses, to reserve judgment until the data are complete and even then to generalize cautiously, and to reinterpret observations and revise theories as new data become available. The primary end of a practitioner's work is action; that of a scientist's is understanding.[2]

Yet, the needs of communities and community organizations and the interest of more and more social scientists in community research have brought the two sides together as never before. Recently, in our capacity as researchers, we worked in collaboration with the leaders and members of local community organizations on the Block Booster Project (see sidebar). The partnership was not always an easy one, but the project yielded benefits for both the researchers and the community organizations that neither could have achieved alone. Without minimizing the difficulties of such a partnership, in our experience the benefits far outweigh the costs of collaboration. In this article we will describe some of the benefits of this kind of research, then examine some common pitfalls that can be negotiated.

Benefits of the Partnership

Gillian Kaye is a community organizer who worked with the Citizens Committee for New York City and worked with us on various stages of the Block Booster Project. In an article that stresses difficulties as well as advantages of the partnership, Kaye describes some of the benefits the committee derived from working with university researchers:

> ***The information obtained by the Block Booster Project on the key variables for maintaining strong organizational viability became the building blocks of a new leadership and organizational development skills-training program at the Citizens Committee. At community meetings and during phone consultations, the same questions constantly arose from neighborhood leaders concerning members not taking on responsibility, low turnout at meetings, and lack of participation. The research process was able to distill key points that lent themselves to the development of a skills-training curriculum and essentially helped us clarify and refine information we had and deliver this information in a generic format. The Block Booster findings on why and how people participate in grass roots organizations, including the importance of a clear organizational structure, decentralizing of planning and workload, and mobilizing member resources helped Citizens Committee staff to organize its curriculum and key in on***

these essential elements...

[W]e were able to expand our training into a more comprehensive package that incorporates the major findings of the Block Booster study. The curriculum offers specific skills and ideas for leaders on how to strengthen several components of their groups:

1. Establishing a strong organizational structure
2. Running effective meetings
3. Strategic planning/problem solving
4. Improving communication, outreach, and publicity
5. Mobilizing and involving members
6. Community research/power analysis
7. Self-assessment

...Another key by-product of the collaboration with the New York team members was the development and utilization of a standardized problem-solving methodology for use with community groups. This tool forms the basis of our nationally recognized community anti-drug work where we facilitate collaboration between the police and key community players in an area where there is drug activity. Using a problem-solving model initially developed by the New York research team members, we help communities develop effective anti-drug campaigns that tackle causes and advance creative community mobilization, law enforcement, and prevention strategies. This methodology has electrified community groups with whom we work or who are trained to use it with their own organizations. It is a concrete and comprehensive way to plan effective strategies and provides a group with a tool to systematize strategy planning.[3]

In working on the Block Booster Project, the research team benefitted as well from its partnership with the Citizens Committee. As host organization, Citizens Committee provided office space and clerical support (expensive commodities in New York City). Our relationship with the community organizers provided us with specific knowledge about the community and community leaders, hypotheses about what was going on in the block associations, suggestions about what topics to study, and ideas about what our results meant and how they could be used. In addition, affiliation with the Citizens Committee provided "street" (as opposed to academic or funding) legitimacy to the project, which meant quicker and more successful entree with block association presidents and other community leaders. People were much more willing to cooperate with the project because of the reputation Citizens Committee has in the neighborhoods and the tangible benefits it provides. In brief, the collaboration increased the relevance, validity, and application of our study.

Estranged Bedfellows?

In spite of their substantial benefits, community/researcher partnerships often run aground on the tensions between practically-oriented community activists and theoretically-oriented

academics. Take the following example:

> ***A researcher concludes a two-and-a-half hour interview with a community leader, satisfied that it was one of the most friendly and informative sessions she had ever conducted. The community leader calls the organizer who helped arrange the interview and blasts her for wasting his time with such a lengthy and pointless procedure.***

> ***The research team then holds a meeting to plan details of data collection strategy. Sensitized to the problem of wasting practitioners' valuable time on "irrelevant" research issues, they do not invite any host agency staff to join the meeting. The agency staff become offended because they are counted on to do much of the day-to-day "grunt" work, but they are not included when an important decision-making meeting is held that will affect their clients; they are not included.***

With jockeying like this occurring in more cases than not, many researchers avoid the collection of data requiring community agency participation in favor of archives and laboratories. Practitioners often view researchers and their entire enterprise with skepticism. But the advantages of working together are too significant to get bogged down in these difficulties. The challenge is to navigate a path that doesn't run aground on the pitfalls of collaboration between (perhaps justifiably) mistrustful partners.

Pitfall #1: Researcher Nonindependence

Research in community organizations is used for many different purposes: to justify a grant, to kill or to publicize a project, to validate an ideology. Too seldom is research used as a tool for organizations to openly assess and improve their viability and effectiveness. An honest evaluation, however, is not so easy to achieve. There are many practical and ethical problems in community program evaluation and applied research. Many of these problems have to do with conflicts, both between the roles of the researcher and the practitioner, and among the researcher's various role definitions. The nonindependence pitfall emerges from the latter kind of conflict: it affects the researcher who is trying to wear too many hats that don't match.

A lack of independence can exaggerate the influence of narrowly expedient purposes at the expense of more objective and broadly useful ones. This type of role strain is perhaps greatest for the proverbial "in-house" evaluator who works for the funding agency or the administrative organization that is responsible for the policy or program being studied. Their jobs may be at stake. But university-based researchers are not immune to vested interests, either. They have their own political and professional axes to grind.

Whether or not the researcher is formally affiliated with the community organization, the fundamental issue in the nonindependence pitfall is one of bias. Since community organizations are almost inevitably as "political" internally as they are externally, their staff,

clients and advocates are often suspicious of researchers' motives. Researchers, accustomed to remaining neutral, often find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being seen only as either allies or enemies. Often, organization leaders are already convinced of the importance of their group's work and cannot accept a researcher who wishes to remain nonpartisan and detached in evaluating their success. Sometimes practitioners view a study as a "test" they are at risk of failing. Group leaders may even oppose the publication of politically sensitive evaluation results.

Many nonindependent researchers, under implicit or sometimes explicit orders to "find" a certain result, thus experience a tremendous internal conflict. If they follow orders, they feel dishonest and risk ostracism from their professional colleagues. If they do not follow orders, they may feel they let their practitioner colleagues down, in addition to risking the termination of their relationship with the organization studied.

The question of nonindependence can also crop up even when researchers are themselves unquestionably independent. Often researchers rely for data collection upon community organization staff and clients, who are obviously not independent of vested organizational- and self-interest in the outcome of the research. This can create unequal and, for some, uncomfortable power relationships. Some organization members or citizens may fawningly bend over backwards to please the researcher; others will resist and resent the researcher; some will exaggerate or invent stories about the organization, program or work.

In the Block Booster Project, as researchers we were dependent on the Citizens Committee and the block associations in the ways described above. Although we never felt any overt or even subtle pressure from Citizens Committee staff to try to influence our results, we may have been *too* closely associated with Citizens Committee, since in some cases we felt leaders were trying to use the project primarily in order to sell themselves to the Committee or to their constituency. (Of course, if we were not affiliated with the Committee the leaders might never have agreed to participate in our study at all.)

In general, unless safeguards are undertaken, the more vested the interest in the study, the less valid the data are likely to be. Although staff jobs or programs are rarely on the line in research or even evaluation projects, the researcher should firmly establish what the immediate practical implications of the results will be (how they will be used under what circumstances) and also try to anticipate what the "unanticipated consequences" might be. Then, assuming organization staff jobs are *not* at stake, the researcher must make a clear point of convincing staff that the study is not a personnel evaluation masquerading as a program evaluation.

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Pitfall #2: Researcher Independence

A second kind of problem arises *between* researchers and practitioners when researchers are *too* independent of the organization that controls the study setting and personnel. Rather than "in-house" investigators, we might call them "out-house" investigators, since a) out-house investigators often must wade through an awful lot of "waste"—generally having to do with legalistic issues of sample

and data access and bureaucratic "red tape," b) they typically spend very little time on site, and c) out-house investigators must deal with what are, compared with the usual practice, onerous inconveniences.

Pitfall #2.A: "The Bureaucracy Blues"

Since gaining "entree" and other bureaucratic obstacles are such a pervasive pitfall—especially in larger, public sector agencies that gather sensitive, personal information—we will describe a case we faced in some detail. Because of the positive working relationship between the Citizens Committee and the New York City Police Department (N.Y.P.D.) we decided to try collecting and analyzing official reports on crime occurring on each of our study blocks. This would represent something of a coup since few other outside researchers had had much luck with obtaining data from N.Y.P.D. We were able to obtain a letter of support for the project from then Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward. Before crime data collection was to begin, however, the N.Y.P.D. legal department sent a contract to the executive director of the Citizens Committee indemnifying N.Y.P.D. in case anything happened while our research assistants were at police headquarters (the language of the contract led us to wonder whether our research assistants would be at great risk of being shot by an escaped prisoner).

University-based researchers are not immune to special interests. They have their own political and professional axes to grind.

The Citizens Committee's pro bono lawyer advised the director not to sign the contract, but said he would draft a more agreeable one. Unfortunately the lawyer was busy with his for-profit clients and never submitted a substitute agreement. After waiting six weeks, the director asked one of the researchers to draft the contract. After conferring with different lawyers who agreed that it mattered little what the agreement said since it probably could not be made binding, we decided to rewrite the agreement toning the tort language down some anyway. The N.Y.P.D. lawyers said that they would accept our version; the Citizens Committee lawyer still refused to allow it.

The research team had all but given up on the crime data when we decided there would be nothing to lose to see whether New York University would be willing to legally sponsor the police data collection. After months of delays on the part of N.Y.P.D. and Citizens Committee lawyers, we had the official N.Y.U. signature on our contract in less than a day and were soon collecting valuable crime data. Our conclusion was that in working with large, bureaucratic community organizations like the N.Y.P.D., one must prepare well in advance and be extraordinarily persistent.

The pitfalls of *nonindependence* and *dependence* give researchers working with community organizations a difficult course to steer, for they have to avoid falling into too much organizational influence (and bias) on the one side, and too little organizational influence (with correspondingly little participation of, or contact with, members) on the other. In this case, the balance gained by having one foot in the community (via Citizens Committee) and

one foot in the professional world (knowing our own lawyers and having a connection with N.Y.U.) helped break an otherwise intimidating bureaucratic deadlock.

Pitfall #2.B: The Invisible Researcher

Once entree is achieved the out-house investigator must deal with the other two pieces of the independence pitfall. One is the common practice of failing to spend enough time in the actual community or organizational settings they study, sometimes even avoiding direct contact with citizen and staff populations. Many researchers view such contact as unnecessary, inconvenient or possibly even as a threat to their objectivity. Urban anthropologists, however, know the invaluable, qualitative insights to be gained from simply walking the neighborhood, "hanging out" with local groups, and casually talking to residents. Too much independence creates in the researcher a far-sightedness that obscures these intimate insights—insights that can lead to a level of understanding that cannot be found using impersonal surveys and quantitative measures alone. This is particularly the case with younger and less educated populations, who may be less accessible to and less comfortable with formal surveys. Another benefit of greater direct contact with the community and the organization is that it allows the researcher to more closely monitor organizational activity and program implementation, key issues in any organization, but especially voluntary ones.

THE BLOCK BOOSTER PROJECT

The Block Booster Project was a 30-month action research project that had two major goals: 1) evaluate the role of block associations in increasing crime-prevention behavior, reducing the fear of crime, encouraging community development, and increasing sense of community and "neighboring"; 2) Assess the organizational characteristics of block associations and develop training materials that block association leaders can use to maintain and strengthen their organizations.[4]

More than 1,000 residents on 47 blocks from three working-class New York City neighborhoods participated in the study. Information was gathered through telephone surveys of block residents, written surveys of block association members, in-person interviews with block association leaders, police records of reported street crimes on each block, and a procedure developed to measure the crime and fear-related physical environment. The Booster Project assessed the impact of block associations by comparing blocks with block associations to similar blocks without associations and comparing members of block associations with nonmembers from the same blocks. Block associations were also analyzed longitudinally for characteristics that distinguished viable groups from those that eventually declined into inactivity. The action part of the project developed and field tested a technical-assistance approach to help such groups remain vital and maximize their capacity, the "Block Booster Process."

The Block Booster Process involved organizational development with community organizations. The design of the Block Booster Process was refined through focus-group consultation with experienced volunteer leaders and professional community organizers who lived outside the neighborhoods in the study. The final design of the intervention was thus a product of scientist-citizen collaboration. Block associations were chosen at random to receive the capacity-building process. Surveys of organizational characteristics were filled out by block association members at their local meetings. A profile of each organization was then prepared, describing its strengths and weaknesses based on our previous research. This was returned to the leaders along with a handbook of suggested interventions to improve the functioning of the organizations. We discussed with the leaders how to use the information at a workshop held in their neighborhood. Blocks that received the Block Booster Process were later compared to the group of block associations that received no such assistance in order to test the effectiveness of the Block Booster approach. Intervention blocks were significantly less likely to decline into inactivity 10 months after the workshops.

The Project was funded by the Ford Foundation and administered by the Citizens Committee for New York City, a private, non-profit organization whose mission is to support and promote the self-help, neighborhood improvement efforts of citizen volunteer groups. Citizens Committee provides technical and financial assistance and recognition to block and neighborhood associations throughout the city. Much of its work is focused in low-income and minority communities. Its Neighborhood Anti-Crime Center and Neighborhood Youth Leadership Center are model programs that have begun to be disseminated and copied nationally.

In our case, although the Block Booster colleagues with the greatest "community visibility" were the project director and the community organizers, members of the research staff also spent time in the community making systematic observations of the physical environment and collecting qualitative data through the use of focus groups and in-depth interviews. We also hoped to find an anthropologist with ethnographic methodological expertise to join the project and collect participant-observer data in the block associations and on street corners, but regret that we were not able to do so.

Pitfall #2.C: Divergent Perspectives and Priorities

Another drawback of organizational independence has to do with the constraints it can place on sampling strategy, what research questions get asked, and how they are asked. In-house researchers have the same constraints, but they at least know the organization and its politics and, as fellow staff members, are perhaps more likely to share the practitioners' views. Independent investigators must sort these issues out in relative darkness.

For example, one of the community organizers involved in the Block Booster Project became frustrated when the research team's findings or theories were at odds with her own experience or theories. She wanted to promote organization and community development through what she called unstructured, feminist-style political processes. The research team, on the other hand, believed—based on a previous study—that all block associations require a certain amount of formal structure to be viable and effective.

The debate arising from this conflict was constructive despite the frustrations that arose. The lessons we learned were a) not only to have the practitioners help define the official goals of the program, but b) also to try to determine what the hidden agenda of the organization or practitioner is, c) to negotiate ahead of time the clearest and most specific procedure possible for determining whose information and experience will be used as a basis for action under what circumstances, and d) to try to validate and give deserved credit to the efforts and feelings of practitioners and clients.

Pitfall #3: "Bottom-Line-Mindedness"

Qualitative understanding and monitoring implementation (see Pitfall 2.B) are not the only reasons for keeping in close contact with and visiting community research sites. Careful monitoring of sites also reveals naturalistic effects on a wider variety of potential targets: not only program staff and clients, but their physical environment, the social climate, and other related issues. In the case of crime- and delinquency-prevention programs, it seems clear that the direction of program development is being extended beyond official crime or surveyed victimization rates. Many of these programs now focus more on raising the hopes and quality of life of youth and other residents through a variety of empowerment strategies. Researchers must be able to respond with commensurate measurement tools.

In our project, we used a wide range of data collection methods to examine individual residents' community-focused attitudes, perceptions, affects and behaviors, and each block's social climate (e.g., cohesion, neighborliness, social control) and crime-related physical environment (e.g., disorder cues, territorial markers, and architectural deterrents to

crime). If we had focused only on crime as the "bottom line," we would have been somewhat disappointed. But block associations were strongly associated with other positive impacts, such as the quality of life on the block, which may have kept fear of crime lower than in areas organized primarily around crime-prevention and crime-information dissemination.

Other studies have made crime reduction the bottom-line impact criterion with even more disappointing results. The disappointment may stem in part from attempting to shoe horn a diversity of populations, programs, and effects into a "one-size-fits-all-programs-and-all-communities" orientation.

Pitfall #4: Underestimating the Practitioner

Probably the most important lesson researchers should learn in working with community leaders, organizers and other practitioners is that they deserve a great deal of respect. They may not always appreciate the utility of empirical knowledge as much as the researcher does and sometimes may feel threatened by researchers. But, in general, they can understand what researchers are trying to do and can help them do it better. They are invaluable allies to have when planning and conducting a study. In respect for community members' understanding of the research, it is important that instead of just taking the data and running, the researcher give something back to the setting or population being studied. It makes sense that if one gives people in an organization a hand in the research, they will understand it better, identify with the project, develop a sense of common purpose with each other and with the researcher, and in addition they will be more likely to read and apply the results of the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the most obvious way to avoid the above pitfalls is for partnerships working on a research project together to hold a discussion in which both researchers and relevant staff and clients each talk about what they do and what their needs, wants and problems are, and then work on an equal basis in planning a study that not only makes sense for both parties, but one that can actually be accomplished. Collaboration should be an egalitarian partnership. Yet researchers must realize that they soon will be gone, while the community organization and its staff and clients will remain. This fact should give the staff and clients the final say in most matters affecting the community.

We have tried to point to just a few of the tensions that are likely to occur when researchers work with citizen groups and even with many larger community organizations that may not appreciate the potential utility of research. Even practitioners who do may be unfamiliar with the pressures to conduct research in a manner that adheres to conventionally accepted research methodology. It could help if researchers would explain the rationale behind the particular methods. But researchers must also realize that, from the practitioner's perspective, professional and organizational constraints are ultimately more important than research design considerations.

In the final analysis, is research with community organizations worth it? With funding and other institutional requirements, practitioners do not always have a choice in the matter. While we cannot speak for the practitioners, Gillian Kaye's article on the Block Booster Project suggests that, on balance, as an organizer she approves of collaboration with

researchers. For researchers, the decision on whether or not to work with community organizations should be an easier one. Given the many practical and empirical benefits and the fact that most of the pitfalls can be avoided, the answer is an emphatic "yes!"

Notes

[1]R. Weiss, "Introduction to Papers: An Interpretive Synthesis," in D. Godwin, M. Lieberman and C. Leukefeld, eds., *The Business of Doing Worksite Research* (Rockville, MD: ADAMHA, 1985).

[2]In extreme cases, scientific objectivity has sometimes been taken to require almost total isolation of researchers from their subjects. See D. Chavis, P. Stucky, & A. Wandersman, "Returning Basic Research to the Community: A Relationship Between Scientist and Citizen," *American Psychologist*, April, 1983, pp. 424-434, for a more thorough discussion of these issues.

[3]G. Kaye, "A Community Organizer's Perspective on Citizen Participation Research and the Researcher-Practitioner Partnership," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, February, 1990, pp. 151-157.

[4] The methods and results of the project are described in A. Wandersman and P. Florin, eds., "Citizen Participation, Voluntary Organizations, and Community Development: Insight for Empowerment Through Research," Special Section of *American Journal of Community Psychology*, February, 1990, pp. 41-177. Coprincipal investigators on the project were David Chavis, Paul Florin, Richard Rich, and Abraham Wandersman.