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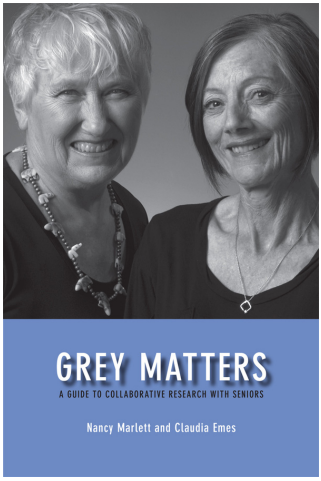

GREY MATTERS
A Guide to Collaborative Research with Seniors
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GO: Conducting Research and Sharing Results

Once your funding is approved, you generally need to move quickly to set up the structures and processes to conduct your research. It is as if the gun has fired and you are off, running as fast as you can.

We are using the principles and standards for good partnered research to guide the implementation of your research project along with the SET: COLLECT: REFLECT model of organizing research. In all stages of implementation, the following indicators of good collaborative inquiry and research are essential. Whether you are creating committees, hiring and training staff, working with agencies and participants, or sharing results, the following indicators should be apparent:

Plain language. Proposals, interactions, meetings with stakeholders and media, research methods and protocols, and reports

should demonstrate language that is understood by all. Where technical terms are needed, meanings are negotiated, clearly defined, and understood by all.

Representation. The various voices in your project are clearly recognized and documented. Changes in voice and conflicts in voice are noted and addressed.

Negotiated process. The methods for achieving partnership at each stage of the research – from creating the research agenda to presenting findings – are negotiated through a process of mutual agreement.

Relevance. The process and results should signal a change in the practices of research.

Begin by reviewing the following principles of collaborative research with each person who joins your team. These set the expectations of how all researchers and participants will be included in the process:

Equal but different: The thoughts and beliefs of all participants about the shared questions and issues are equally valid. Everyone from the grant holders, project coordinators, senior researchers, participants, and volunteers need to accept that everyone will have a say. Regular meetings attended by all parties are the cornerstone of this, but it is also important to have mixed committees to encourage people to speak in smaller task-oriented groups. The committee leaders may need coaching in how to conduct meetings when seniors and academics are involved. It is sometimes necessary to meet with the different parties (seniors, academics, students) to practice speaking up and preparing for the group. Academics have a tendency to take over and use academic jargon, and it can be difficult to break these habits.

Trust: Trust is hard to earn and is quickly lost. Actively acknowledging the contributions of every participant leads to greater understanding

and an openness to hear and learn from the voice of others. Here again, the role of the coordinator is key to ensuring that the accomplishments and contributions of all members are acknowledged as part of the project. The concept of taking e-mail minutes and sharing these among all project team members works here for team members feel valued and recognized.

Shared power: Nobody decides for somebody else. Sharing power starts with the expectation to listen and the freedom to express opinion. Each person learns from others and grows in his or her own confidence and capacity. The coordinator and committees need to ensure that there is a consensus process in place for meetings and a process to make decisions between meetings. It is not feasible to make all decisions in committee, but it is also not acceptable to make decisions without consultation. This requires a strong coordinator that summarizes information and data for discussion, sets meetings, writes minutes and e-mails and maintains open logs of progress. If the participants are going to own the results, they must feel they own the process.

Shared work: To share expertise there needs to be a willingness to use common language, to model and mentor unfamiliar activities. Learning to share requires time for reflection on the process and joint ownership of successes and failures. Working together includes the glamorous tasks of planning and committee work but also the tasks of clearing up, making tea, and taking the heat for missing deadlines. It may be just as hard for an academic to learn to chat with a potential participant over tea as it is for a senior to analyze data. Neither task is exclusive in collaborative research.

This chapter is about doing the research: creating the committees, recruiting and training volunteers or paid senior researchers, and

collecting and analyzing data. Also included is a section on evaluating the information that has been collected and analyzed.

The chapter ends with one of the most critical stages of conducting research – sharing the results. Although information can be shared using a variety of methods, the most important consideration is to target the likely consumers of the newly developed knowledge and find ways to engage them in discussion.

A. Creating Research Committees

Careful organization is required to ensure that everything is running smoothly, and this is especially true in collaborative ventures. Although you may feel that one good organizer is enough, you need to include others in the process so that there is good communication and liaison with those who can support your research. The following are the types of committees or groups you may need:

Advisory Committee. By now you can select those people who you can go to for guidance and direction. Key to every research investigation is creating clarity around the purpose of the research. An advisory committee plays an important role in translating the questions for the group they represent.

The advisory committee can be as large as makes sense but most advisory committees consist of five to twelve stakeholders. While they are advising you they are learning about what you are doing and linking you to the resources they have. Meet on a regular basis every two or three months. Take minutes to create a paper trail.

Management Committee. The management committee holds the authority to plan, oversee, and implement the research project with the input of the committees. The size will be dependent upon the size and complexity of the research. You will need a minimum of the research coordinator, the named investigator, a member of the advisory committee, and team leaders from the research.

Liaison Committee. If you are working with a university department, a government body, seniors association, etc., you may need a liaison committee to ensure that everyone is in the loop. Some find that they can combine the advisory committee and the liaison committee.

Research Teams. It is essential that there be a clear organizational structure of the project. We found that seniors liked to work in small teams (see Chapter 3), but there are many structures that you can use. Whatever structure you adopt, it is important for the researchers to meet on a regular basis to maintain motivation and common direction.

B. Recruit and Train Seniors as Researchers

Please refer to Chapter 2, on how to train seniors, and Appendix 1 (Resilience as Social Capital) when recruiting seniors as researchers. Chapters 4 through 7 each have a section on recruiting and training seniors to conduct specific types of research. If you have been doing this section of the book with a group of seniors, you already have a group of informed, motivated seniors ready to receive specific training for your project. Senior researchers put forward the following suggestions and these were used in the later stages of the pilot to refine the training. You may find these helpful reminders in implementing your training sessions.

- Recruit and train about a third more seniors than needed to ensure that you can allow flexibility in scheduling their time.
- The training sessions should be no longer than four hours in length (10:30 to 2:30) with a chance to take breaks.

- Training seems to work best with workbooks, where guidelines are included along with clear steps in the process
- When working in a group of fifteen or more, ensure that there is opportunity to discuss what is being learned in small groups.
- Provide opportunities to practice the skills with feedback and support.
- Share ideas and results from practice.

If you are moving directly from training to data collection, use the training time to finalize the research protocols and instructions. You can also use this training time to practice with data collection strategies and analyze data collected during training to familiarize senior researchers with analysis and interpretation.

C. Collect and Analyze Information

Data collection and analysis are two sides of the same coin. The data you collect determines the range of analysis you can use. We are not covering statistical processes of analysis in this manual because these tend to be associated with quantitative studies, which collect numbers. The four techniques chosen for this book are particularly useful in collabotative projects. These techniques have been incorporated into the SET: COLLECT: REFLECT research design for partnership research. The specific methods are:

Field-work: Here you are collecting data by observing, talking to people, looking at documents and materials. Chapter 3 outlines field-work where seniors conduct research while participating in the activities of the group.

Surveys and questionnaires: The strategy here is to construct specific questions about your area of interest. The questions can be written as a questionnaire and given to people to fill out in person, by mail, or on the Internet. The questions may also guide interviews. Chapter 4 is devoted to the many ways to ask specific questions.

Focus groups: Focus groups were chosen specifically for inclusion as a strategy for collecting data with seniors because it combines a number of techniques into a recognizable format. Chapter 6 was designed and is devoted to the use of focus groups with seniors.

In-depth narrative interviewing: While there are a number of techniques for conducting open-ended and discursive interviews, narrative interviewing was selected as particularly useful with seniors. The technique presented has been created specifically for seniors and combines the use of structured formats, guided questions to elicit stories, and analysis techniques. Chapter 7 presents this material.

The **SET: COLLECT: REFLECT** model provides a set of steps to ensure that seniors are central to the partnership and that they are included in all stages. If you are using a structured research design, you might want to read Marlett (1998) on Partnership research. It provides guidelines for negotiating research roles.

D. Evaluate What You Have Accomplished

As you are ready to implement your study, take time to think about how to evaluate your research process apart from the knowledge you gain. While you need to complete the required research report, you will also want to evaluate how you conducted the inquiry and what you have learned about collaboration in order to plan the next steps, share your results with other seniors, and take the action suggested in your findings.

Evaluating what you have accomplished is very important from a number of perspectives beyond the actual completion of your research. Some of the evaluation approaches that might prove useful include:

Process evaluation of what you are doing and the changes you make during the research. You will want to evaluate progress automatically at monthly meetings of your management committee or regular meetings with your advisory committee. Having a process evaluation format included in regular meetings will help keep you on track. We found that evaluation meetings of the entire team after each step in the resilience research provided the most effective input to the research and ensured that everyone had a say in evaluation and the direct implementation of ideas.

Negotiate the markers you will track as you conduct your research. These markers might include:

Timelines for achieving the goals and objectives. Are we on track or what is holding us back? How do we modify either the work plan or the expectations? This might best be accomplished by reviewing and modifying the timelines that are part of the research project.

Budget and resources. Are we on track with our expenditures? Are the resources we allocated working effectively, do we need to modify, add or reduce aspects of our infrastructure, personnel, or equipment? What are the implications for short falls and over expenditures for the next time period.

Partnership effectiveness. Is the project meeting the indicators of good partnered research? You might regularly review plain language achievements and obstacles using specific examples.

Does each group in the collaboration feel represented and respected? Regular process evaluations should uncover and address inequalities that will lead to loss of trust and ultimately the failure of your collaboration. Some of the indicators you might want to track include: who is speaking on behalf of the project? What negotiations have taken place about roles and expectations? What strengths are emerging that can be celebrated and what problems need attention?

Next step. This may be the most important of the process evaluation. It asks 'Okay, now what?' as milestones are reached. The questions to include in this section challenge everyone to see the current research not as an end but as a stepping stone. What new questions have arisen in this time period? What research might come of this? Who has come onto the scene who might become a new collaborator and finally, What can we do to encourage other seniors to take up the challenge of this research?

Summary evaluation of what you have accomplished. If you were able to use a Collaborative Project Logic Model or equivalent you would refer to your success in the short term, intermediate and long range objectives. In chapter eight we focused on how to write what the research project hoped to achieve. These are the objectives that you will include in the summary evaluation.

Short term objectives. These are the objectives related to conducting your study: what you are able to do and how it impacts those conducting the research. You are able to gather the information as proposed and make changes when collecting and analyzing data? What you find out (knowledge generation)? You are able to increase research abilities of seniors and students; you are able to impact the capacity of seniors and collaborators (capacity building). You are able

to share your results through the work of seniors. What methods you are able to explore and use as part of this knowledge sharing– media, fine arts presentations, reports, newsletters.

Practical and Policy outcomes. These are the intermediate goals for the project and are based how the results of the study might impact the lives of seniors, the practices of professionals, and the policies of organizations and governments. What outcomes hold promise for implementation, what suggestions arose for changes to practice and policy?

Long term goals. How has the research influenced the possibilities for change in the long term? What new alliances are possible, what next steps emerge from the project?

E. Sharing Results

You will find that the media are interested in the research that seniors do so it is important to plan ahead and be prepared. In our project, the university notified the media of our project as part of their community partnerships. The following are some of the ways to get your information out:

Newsletters from your sponsoring agency. It is most helpful to write short pieces about your research as it progresses and then a larger piece once your research is complete. Keep the tone personal; highlight researchers contributions and interesting findings.

Website information. If you can afford a website developer to set up a project site, you will find that it allows you to recruit participants, find allies in your work, share results, and find other avenues for research.

Regular media. You might host a news briefing when you receive approval of your funding. Be sure to invite local or neighbourhood

newspapers, television, and radio stations. Set a time for media to come back at regular intervals and at the end of the project.

Pamphlets or reports. The elder abuse project produced a powerful booklet that is still in demand about their research project. These materials can be available online, through other seniors groups or government agencies.

Theatre presentations. Data can be translated into a story line or readers theatre where seniors are involved in creating the presentation and performing for many different groups. If you are interested in this exciting work, contact ACT II Studio at Ryerson University.

Visual presentations. There is considerable scope in mural presentations of research outcomes, posters, and visual art forms. Contact your local Fine Arts department at your college or university to find out more about this exciting way to place your research findings in public spaces.

Film and documentaries. The National Film Board has made a commitment to assisting groups with research messages to use film to communicate their message. A term used for this endeavour is popular theatre. With the advent of YouTube, the world is your audience.

F. Take Action

With results in hand now comes the hard question: "So what?" There is always a lot of enthusiasm when your research proves that there is a need for action. However, be careful not to assume that, because the results are important to you, anyone else cares enough to take up the challenge. Your work is just beginning.

The call to take action generally begins as results come in, but it is wise to keep research and action separate unless you are engaged in ongoing PAR research.

A committee that is separate from your research group should be convened to look at action steps. You may also find that your advisory committee may be willing to explore potential actions.

Action is generally aimed at changes to existing social structures and processes. For example, in our research we changed the perspective of Kerby members so that they are confident that they can conduct research that is meaningful to the membership. Rather than contracting external resources, the organization can now validate its positions and services in various areas using collaborative inquiry and research.

In this chapter we have attempted to provide a step-by-step guide to build the capacity of seniors to become researchers. We have introduced examples from the elder abuse experience at the Kerby Centre as a way for you to think about your own topic.

If you have read this through on your own you are likely feeling overwhelmed but take heart, it is meant to take ten to twenty sessions of discussion to understand fully. If you are using this as a checklist, we hope that you find the resources and references helpful. If you are contemplating inviting seniors to work with you in a research project, we hope you find ideas to make your collaboration one of equal partners.