

CHAPTER TWELVE

Research Partnerships in Child Welfare: Synthesis and Future Directions

Ivan Brown, Nico Trocmé, Claire Chamberland and Sophie Léveillé

INTRODUCTION

An increasingly important trend within the environment of applied research is the focus on building partnerships as part of the process of planning and carrying out research activities. This emerges from the current view that new ways of addressing child welfare need to be found so that we can respond better to the needs of children and families, and so that we can respond to the changing needs of society. Part of this view is a growing acceptance – including endorsement from funding agencies in Canada – that one preferred way to carry out research is through university-based and community-based partnerships. A number of models have been developed that set out types of partnerships and the objectives associated with each, although few of these are theory based (see chapter 1 for details).

Three main assumptions behind this increasing focus on partnerships emerge from the content for this book's chapters. First, partnerships that draw upon the pooled knowledge and skills of experts and various types of professionals and non-professionals should produce research that uses available expertise and experience efficiently. This assumption is attractive to both those carrying out research and those who fund it. Second, research partnerships engage a variety of stakeholders who have specific, and sometimes differing, interests in the outcomes of the research. The assumption here is that the research objectives are more grounded in real needs, data planning and collection are facilitated by the engagement of partners, and the results are more applicable to policy makers, service providers and service users. Third, research outcomes

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that result from successful partnerships have a higher likelihood of being transformed, by a process that is becoming known as knowledge transfer and exchange, into processes and products that are readily accessible to stakeholders. This aspect of using research results is increasingly becoming a requirement of funders, a priority for researchers, and a necessary condition for community partners' involvement.

The preceding chapters of this book build upon the systematic review presented in chapter 1 by describing several research partnerships in child welfare in ways that illustrate aspects of these three assumptions. There was a considerable literature on partnerships available (see chapter 1), but there was no overall "blueprint" for forming or maintaining partnerships when these projects began. As a consequence, their structures represent the "best guess" of those planning and leading the research, based on their knowledge of existing literature, and their collective experiences and judgment. Although this is commonly done in research planning, the current authors consider that it would be helpful to those who wish to form successful research partnerships to have some additional conceptual and practical tools to assist them. The primary purpose of this chapter, then, is to construct such tools from the "lessons learned" as summarized in chapter 1, and from the collective experiences of the research partnerships described in chapters 2-11, and present them in the form of: 1) an overall framework for considering partnerships in child welfare research, 2) a description of the advantages and challenges of research partnerships, 3) identification and brief description of five key components of successful partnerships, along with strategies for enhancing their success, and 4) a checklist, to guide research partners in how to proceed in a step-by-step way. A final brief section directs the reader toward some aspects of research partnerships that may need to be considered in the future.

The ideas presented in this chapter emerged from an analysis of the descriptions of the research partnerships in the preceding chapters. Using an iterative process, ideas reported by the chapter authors were recorded separately for each chapter, then grouped together into topics and themes. All chapter authors described advantages and disadvantages of research partnerships, and thus this section represents the common wisdom that emerged from their comments. Successful partnerships were described in a variety of ways, and a content analysis of the ideas presented resulted in five main themes, which are described below as five key components of successful partnerships. The conceptual framework emerged from the themes that described the research partnership process, and the checklist

for research partnerships is a summary of practical steps presented in the other three sections.

A FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH

The literature synthesis reported in chapter 1 found that 14 different “types” of research partnerships were described in the literature (see chapter 1, Table 1.4). Some of these were grounded in theory and some were not. The 14 types of partnerships were described by various names such as action, participatory, or collaborative research. Across these types, a number of different qualitative methods were used. These include reflection, case studies, content analysis, grounded theory, ethnography, comparative qualitative methods, and qualitative and quantitative methods (see chapter 1, Table 1.2). This suggests that research partnerships can work effectively for a wide variety of partnership structures and methodologies.

Leaders who are moving toward forming research partnerships should consider their theoretical basis, and the most appropriate methodology to address their research questions and capture credible data. Like the studies reported in the literature and throughout this book, these will differ rather widely according to the purpose of the research, and the population or environment being studied. The synthesis of the research described in this book suggests that all partnership research follows four general research stages – formation, development, data activity, and application – and that each of these is composed of specific research components. These are described graphically in Figure 12.1. The principal partnership characteristics that were most associated with each stage in the research described are listed beside each stage. It should be noted, however, that these characteristics are *most* important at their designated stages, but are important through the research process.

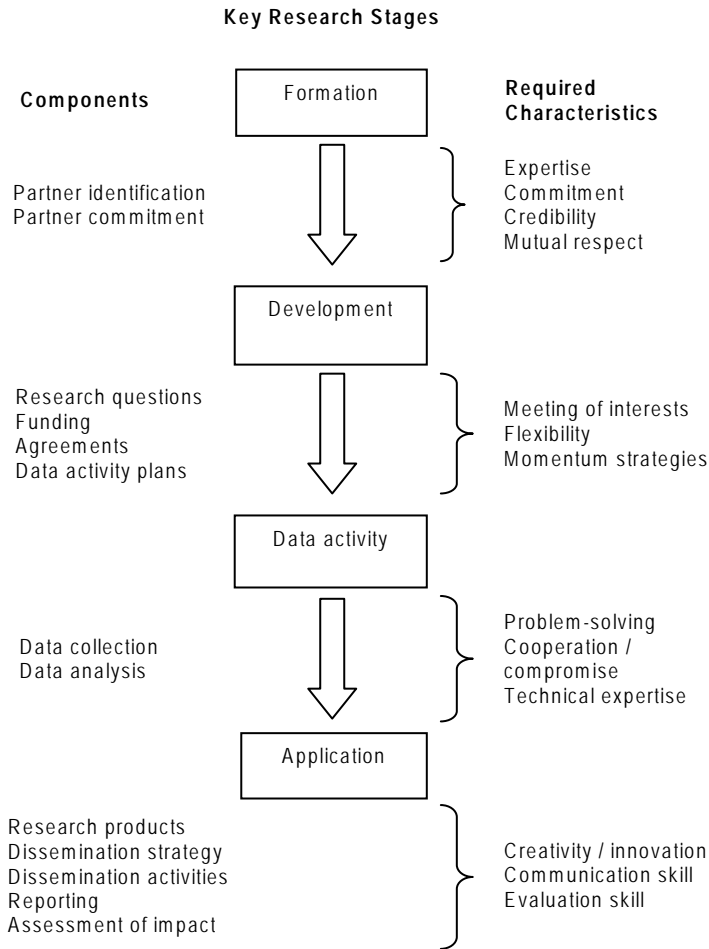


Figure 12.1. A framework for effective partnerships in child welfare research.

ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Advantages

Advantages of carrying out research within a partnership have been specified to some degree in available literature (see chapter 1). Like previous studies, those described in this book vary in nature and scope from one research project to another. Partnerships of researchers in

two or more universities draw together expertise of various kinds (e.g., knowledge of service systems, research methodologies, data analysis, report writing). Research that features partnerships of academics, policy makers, community organizations and groups that represent the study population bring together an even broader range of expertise, and helps to maximize available resources, including funding, personnel, time, and infrastructure. Good use can also be made of other shared in-kind contributions, such as workspace, support personnel, and equipment. Research partnerships facilitate the development of research questions that are tailored to the stated needs of those who can use knowledge gained from the research. This validates the project by ensuring that it is applicable to the field of study and that it is likely to be used in practice, one of the expectations of most applied academic research. Other advantages of research partnerships that emerged from those reported in this book are summarized below.

From the point of view of university-based researchers

University-based researchers have traditionally secured funding for research projects, led investigations, and taken responsibility for dissemination. Working within research partnerships challenges this model by presenting a broader, more complex, model that has many advantages for the researcher.

Overall advantages

- Access to a practical knowledge base (things that work clinically), aspects of which are often not described well in academic literature.
- Builds knowledge about practice and develops skills for addressing practice issues.
- Provides a setting for testing and applying evidence-based practices.

Logistical advantages

- Access to a study population.
- Assistance in recruiting and maintaining study participants, including best ways to seek involvement.
- Providing additional staff resource, space, equipment, and other in-kind support from partners.

Research-Community Partnerships in Child Welfare

- Learning from practitioner partners how to approach and work with the study population, including how to ask questions to maximize data.
- Learning from practitioners the best methods of showing respect, being sensitive toward, and including members of the study population.
- Practitioners who are familiar with potential study participants can approach them to ask for voluntary involvement.
- Practitioner partners can facilitate data collection by organizing data collection opportunities around their usual activities.
- Use of usual practical procedures for maintaining confidentiality.
- Access to practice-related reports, policies, and laws that strongly impact the field and how practice is carried out.
- Opportunities to share results with practice and consumer groups.

Advantages for improved outcomes

- Outcomes that are firmly grounded in the realities of a living population, a social problem, and a service response to that problem.
- New presentation and publication opportunities, especially knowledge transfer and exchange methods.

From the point of view of community partners

There are also many advantages to research partnerships from the point of view of community groups, service organizations, policy making bodies, or groups / organizations representing the study population, often referred to collectively as “community partners” inasmuch as they are non-academic in orientation.

Overall advantages

- Establishes or furthers a research culture as part of the normal functioning of a practice organization. Those involved are likely to be involved in future research.

- For groups representing the study population, a research partnership provides them with a voice, a way to have their issues better understood, and some hope for improvement.
- University-based researchers provide additional expert information on the functioning of the study population.
- Partnership research offers a low-cost way for community partners to carry out some research that would otherwise not be feasible.
- Can get concrete answers to questions that are important to them, and can potentially lead to improved service.
- Establishes the study population as an important focus of attention for the practice organization and for the field.

Logistical advantages

- By assisting with a research project, the community partner can become involved in research that is directly relevant to its practice.
- Direct access to mentorship from academic researchers.
- Opportunity for staff to learn new sets of skills (e.g., ethical approval, recruitment, data collection, data input, data analysis, reporting of results).
- Research funds provide an opportunity to hire research assistants and coordinators.
- Access to university libraries and vast electronic resources.
- Opportunities to co-present knowledge with academic and scientific audiences, including oral presentations, posters, production of audio-visual materials, written papers, plain-language summaries, and brief reports.

Advantages for improved outcomes

- Research products include and reflect the deep experience of practitioners and the practice field.
- Application to practice is more relevant and more apparent.
- Set up the beginnings of a research agenda; begin to create a research culture that did not previously exist.

- Summaries of “what works” with the population reflects a blend of academic and practice perspectives.

From the point of view of partnerships as a whole

Overall advantages

- Rich context for knowledge and skills exchange.
- Environment for developing new areas for research and new perspectives on research.
- A “natural” way to meet broader professional development and continuing education needs.
- Broader understanding of the issue because it is examined by a team of people who have various perspectives (e.g., academic, family, service provider, policy maker).

Logistical advantages

- Partnership linkages are in place for other projects that may develop in the future. There is a probability that other joint projects will emerge.
- A wider variety of additional resource available for the research study (in-kind contributions from all partners).
- Mutual learning in knowledge transfer process and content.

Advantages for improved outcomes

- Real life case examples illustrate research findings.
- Can contribute directly to the development of a formal treatment or program evaluation.
- Knowledge transfer methods and products reflect a blend of academic and practitioner knowledge that is likely to be used.

Challenges

Although there are numerous advantages of carrying out research within a partnership model, there are also some challenges that arise. A number of barriers to collaboration are described from previous literature in chapter 1 and are summarized in that chapter’s Table 1.7. Four challenges

to research partnerships are highlighted here because they emerged from the project descriptions as particularly important. First, leadership needs to be clearly identified and supported throughout by all partners so that the project can proceed in a timely and efficient way. Strong leadership by one person works somewhat against the spirit of partnership, which features flexibility of roles, respect for different kinds of expertise, and inclusive and active participation by all partner representatives. Certainly, ongoing consultation and frequent communication need to take place, but holding meetings, incorporating feedback, keeping the partnership team informed, and weighing various opinions and options all take time and effort. These sometimes impede the timely progression of a research project. Deft leadership is sometimes required to manage a research partnership, which is more complex than traditional ways of conducting research, and to keep its strengths working for the process rather than slowing down progress.

Strength of commitment, and ability to make and sustain a commitment, is a second challenge that needs to be addressed. Community partners, such as child welfare agencies, often experience high demand on their time and resources for activities directly related to child protection. All research that involves human services makes demands on the time and resources of community organizations and study participants, but research using a partnership model may make extra demands because of its consultative, information-sharing, and skills-sharing nature. Perhaps understandably, there are times when child protection concerns need to take priority over research activities, but this can lead to “lows” in research activities and non-adherence to the data collection schedule. Community agencies, and even policy making bodies, often experience a high turnover of staff, and it is difficult to maintain methodological consistency and ongoing commitment if new staff have to be introduced and trained while the project is in progress. For research partnerships to function successfully, it is essential that their benefits are seen as greater than the extra time and resources it takes to work in a partnership. To obtain this balance, it is often helpful to anticipate problems and to put in place special strategies in advance for dealing with them.

Third, identifying an adequate number of study participants is sometimes problematic. In child welfare and many related fields, individuals and families may leave service for a variety of reasons, and not be available for the full length of the study. From an ethical point of view, participation must be voluntary, and a number of child welfare researchers report that the percentage of those agreeing to participate is

not high. For those who do agree to participate, priorities may change in their lives, they may move, they may change their minds, or they may simply forget. As the researchers in chapter 3 noted, “It takes an average of seven phone calls to secure an appointment.” Researchers often find it challenging to identify an appropriate comparison group, and voluntary participation can be even more difficult to obtain than in the study group. Practitioner partners often have established methods for tracking and locating people that are useful for university-based researchers to adopt. On a personal level, practitioners, especially those who are already familiar with the study participants, can often be much more successful than university-based researchers or hired research assistants in obtaining and maintaining participation rates. Finally, some strategies for rewarding participation, such as honoraria, free food, or reimbursement for time or travel often prove helpful to encourage participation.

Fourth, maintaining momentum can be problematic. Within the course of carrying out a research project, interest and commitment are often strong at the beginning but become weaker as the project proceeds. Strategies need to be put in place to maintain momentum from all partnership parties. Interest in creating and expanding a research culture within a policy making body or a community organization are sometimes dependent upon the leadership of a single person or a small group of people, and personnel changes over time. This can reduce or negate a forward thrust toward engaging in a robust research agenda. Funding from outside sources is typically available for specified periods of time, and when that time draws to a close momentum is necessarily lost and is sometimes difficult or impossible to regain.

These and other challenges associated with research partnerships require attention and resources, but they are not considered to detract unduly from the advantages of such partnerships. Careful preparation and execution of research project plans can help to minimize the challenges and ensure success of the project for all the project partners. The conceptual and practical tools provided in the succeeding sections offer specific ideas and strategies for doing this.

FIVE KEY COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

There are many different ways of constructing and maintaining successful research partnerships. Seventeen facilitators of collaboration from previous literature are described in chapter 1 (see chapter 1,

Table 1.6 for a summary), and 12 overall suggestions are provided for effective collaborations. Building on these, analysis of the research in the subsequent chapters suggests that five key components are common to successful partnerships. Numerous strategies can be devised to support the key components, and some examples of such strategies that emerged from the collective experience of the research described in this book are shared below.

1. The central *research questions* must emerge from the joint interests and needs of all partners, with all voices being heard and respected:

This includes:

- A clear question or questions that are of academic significance and relevant to the lives of the study population.
- All voices being represented: *clinical voice* identifies knowledge that would help improve practice; *policy voice* identifies knowledge that would help set improved policy; *family / children / community voice* identifies issues of concern to those affected by the research; *academic voice* identifies academic evidence and knowledge gaps, and research methodology; and *other relevant voices*.

Strategies to enhance development of quality research questions:

- Set up an advisory board or consultation group, representative of all partners' interests (including the study population), early in the process to help shape and refine the research questions. Some examples of venues for doing this include: a meeting, informal discussions, a focus group, or a survey.
- Do not assume that all partners are able to articulate clearly their interests or concerns. These may need to be nurtured and developed through group discussions.
- Partners need to respect the fact that other partners often have somewhat different interests in the same project.
- There should be a strong sense that the research partnership is addressing a set of real-life issues that are of importance to people's lives and mean something to everyday practice and life activities. Practitioner partners and partners representing the population being addressed can help ensure that the population is clearly understood and that the research question fits.

- The research questions addressed should have passionate commitment: “A passionate cause grounded in spirit” (chapter 6).
 - There should be ongoing opportunities to learn together more about the research questions as the project progresses.
2. There must be trust in the **credibility** of each of the partners.

This includes:

- A reciprocal recognition of the expertise of each of the partners (e.g., experience of practitioners, life experiences of those affected, scientific expertise, policy expertise).
- A sense of ownership by each of the partners.
- A sense of trust among the partners that others know what to do.
- Partners’ knowledge of each other’s values, beliefs, and practices.
- Agreement from the outset that all project activities will be as inclusive as possible of all partners.

Strategies to enhance credibility:

- There may be a need to develop mutual respect and trust in credibility, to create an environment in which research is valued (e.g., through group discussions).
- There may be a need for researchers to develop their understanding of, and trust in, the value of real-life and clinical experience. Trust sometimes builds slowly, so do not expect it to occur suddenly or to be fully manifested at the beginning of the project. Along the way, acknowledge steps in developing trust.
- Community partner members are not always rewarded to the full extent of their own expertise, and this may need to be drawn out.
- Previous partnerships and relationships can expedite the planning of a new project.
- University-based researchers need to be physically visible in community partner settings.
- Designate community partner representatives as “ambassadors of science” and “ambassadors for evidence-base practice” within their organizations, and university-based researchers as “ambassadors of quality practice” within their institutions.

- It is helpful to build upon practitioners' prior knowledge of research, and researchers' prior experience in community-based research.
 - Put in place a partnership history of excellence (e.g., cross appointments, student placements, speakers for professional development).
 - Community partners can arrange for information sessions and training sessions presented by university-based partners.
 - University-based partners can arrange for a presentation by practitioners of the characteristics and issues associated with the study population.
 - Although the ultimate responsibility for the research project is typically held by a university-based principal investigator, increase ownership by making all partners part of a funding application process.
 - Increase credibility of community partners by having students do practice, volunteer work, or part-time employment. Graduate students may also use community partners as sites for data collection for dissertations.
3. Partnerships must be *formalized* and *thoroughly planned*.

This includes:

- Secure funding.
- Approved workplan that specifies activities to be done, people who will do them, and the timelines for doing them.
- Ethical approval.
- A written agreement that is comprehensive (roles, responsibilities, activities, products, etc.).
- Clearly thought-out procedures for carrying out the project, especially for recruiting participants and collecting, analyzing and interpreting data.
- A clear statement of data ownership.

Strategies to ensure formalized and thoroughly planned partnerships:

- Assign one or more persons to act as the driving force for moving the project forward.

- Spend time at the beginning of a project to get broad partner support, such as support from an executive director, board of directors, management staff, front-line staff, and groups represented by the study population. Such support needs to be reinforced from time to time.
 - Obtain ethical approval from the lead university (and others if required), and also from community partners that have ethical approval systems in place. There may need to be more than one ethical approval to reflect the perspectives of partners. Some vulnerable populations need strict ethics, and special procedures to obtain valid data. At times, special presentations or submissions to ethics boards are needed to explain particular circumstances, or data collection procedures that are considered most appropriate for the study population.
 - Provide opportunities for formal and informal input into the planning of the project.
 - Provide regular updates on the progress of the project (e.g., website postings, written communications, short messages, and celebrations of accomplishment).
 - Put a plan in place to build research skills and capacity within community partners.
4. There must be a commitment to ***flexibility*** and ***mutual problem-solving***.

This includes:

- Agreement by all partners that there has to be an element of flexibility in all the activities of the research project.
- Recognition and allowance for the work needs of personnel from each of the partners.
- A mutual understanding of the priorities of each of the partners.
- A clearly laid-out process for making changes and solving issues that arise.

Strategies to increase flexibility and mutual problem solving:

- Provide ample opportunities for making and responding to suggestions for changes as the project progresses.
- Work to increase the sense of involvement in the research project by members of community partners to enhance

their participation in anticipating problems and looking for solutions.

- Partners need to perceive each other as equals to problem-solve in a supportive way.
 - Recruiting study participants, and maintaining their involvement over time, are areas where patience and flexibility are often especially required. Solicit multiple ideas for how best to do this from practitioner partners.
 - Amend objectives, procedures, data collection methods, data analyses, and methods of presenting results in response to sound partner advice.
5. There must be *strategies for maintaining momentum* actively in place.

This includes:

- Commitment to the process and outcomes of the project by all partners.
- Ongoing enthusiasm for the project.
- Integrity by those working on the project: “Doing the right thing when no one is looking” (Elder Bea Shawanda, chapter 6).

Strategies for maintaining momentum:

- It is helpful if one person or more acts as the driving force for moving the project forward.
- Throughout the research process, stress joint ownership of the project.
- Arrange meetings of the advisory board or consultation group to hear ideas from all partners (including the study population), and to get their feedback.
- Present preliminary and ongoing results to the data collectors to keep up their interest, to help them understand the potential use of the study. This works to maintain interest and to help data collectors see that their extra work is worthwhile.
- There should be a process in place that occurs throughout the project for ongoing learning by all partners, and development of a research partnership culture (e.g., meetings, seminars, etc.). This builds enthusiasm for growing in a new area.
- If it is consistent with ethical approval for the study, reimburse or otherwise reward study participants for their time and expertise in providing data.

- The project should challenge partner members to take on leadership in new areas as they emerge throughout the project.
- Partner members need to understand, through their ongoing discussions, that work on this project is one link in a chain that establishes a long-term research culture.
- Encourage discussions about the project in a wide variety of informal venues (e.g., lunchroom, hallway, coffee shop, pub, etc.).
- As part of the research project workplan, include a series of professional development activities that will help focus interest and build skills and knowledge.
- Devise unique plans for maintaining enthusiasm and commitment. Some examples include: specified amounts of time to work on the project; regular study updates in different formats such as brief newsletters, email messages, meetings, or formal learning opportunities; specific training sessions in data entry and analysis; and skill development in plain language writing.
- If it is consistent with ethical approval, consider small ways to reward practitioner partners for their extra work. For example, a group reward such as a microwave oven for the kitchen or a camera for staff use could be given for researching specified data collection targets.

Conclusion from Five Key Components

Five key components of successful research partnerships are presented above, along with examples of specific strategies to enhance the likelihood of their success. Not all the strategies listed are appropriate to a particular research partnership, nor are they all necessary for its success. On the other hand, other strategies may need to be adopted. One of the responsibilities of the partnership leader(s) – and for the collaborative team – is to ensure that the most appropriate strategies are adopted and used.

CHECKLIST FOR RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

A brief checklist for research partnerships is provided in Table 12.1 as a summary of the overall recommendations from previous research reported in chapter 1 and the research partnerships described in chapters 2-11 of this book. The checklist is intended as one practical tool to assist those wanting to ensure the success of their partnership activities,

although research teams may wish to use others as well. Additional strategies to enhance success are listed in previous sections or elsewhere in the book. Thus, the checklist is a basic list of things to consider for research partnerships, but is by no means all the collaborative team should do to ensure success.

Table 12.1. Checklist for Research Partnerships

Type of research partnership

Select the research partnership that fits your situation best:

- Partnership led jointly by all partners
- Partnership led jointly by two or more partners (but not all)
- Partnership led by researcher(s)
- Partnership led by community organization
- Partnership led by government or government department
- Partnership led by family, community, or interest group

Before you start

- Identify partners, and lead person from each partner.
- Survey key partner personnel to ascertain interest, commitment, and focus of the proposed project.
- Secure funding for the project, including contributions of each partner (in-kind or financial contribution).
- When soliciting funds, include at least one person from each partner as investigators.
- Decide on the kinds of involvement of each partner (direct partner, advisory committee, networked member, etc.).
- Decide on the degree of involvement of each partner (number of tasks, time commitment, funding commitment, etc.).
- Hold one or more pre-project workshops or discussion groups, where members of partners can learn more about the process and outcomes of research projects.
- Obtain ethical approval, or at least ethical input, from all partners. Ethical issues may differ for each of the partners.
- Determine if approval for the project, and/or ethical approval, is needed from the community (especially in First Nations).

Table 12.1 Continued

Getting ready for the project

- ___ Hold a meeting or meetings to develop rapport, to set out the objectives of the project, and to specify the roles of each of the partners (e.g., data analysis a researcher role, but interpretation of the results a dual responsibility).
- ___ Hold planning sessions where all partners identify potential problems, logistical issues (e.g., ways to collect data, confidentiality, recruiting).
- ___ Check that the planned data will be meaningful and useful to all partners.
- ___ Set up an Advisory Committee for the project (national, provincial, city-wide, or representatives from partner organizations and institutions who are not involved directly in the project).
- ___ Set up Reference Groups on various aspects of the project; include members from all partners.
- ___ Set up clear and efficient channels of communication.
- ___ Develop, agree upon, and sign a formal agreement among all partners.

Carrying out the project

- ___ Set up strategies for recruitment and data collection that set out duties and responsibilities of each partner – including specific roles of project personnel within each partner (e.g., 3 research assistants and 4 community partner personnel will collect data).
- ___ Get a commitment from the practitioner partner to make initial contacts with potential participants, and to assist in recruitment.
- ___ Meet regularly (all partners) to review progress and do further planning.
- ___ Share data with all partners at two or more points as it comes in to discuss relevance, to problem-solve regarding logistical challenges, and to plan for use of the data.
- ___ Meet with partners to discuss the analysis and interpretation of data.

Using the knowledge gained

- ___ Identify audiences for dissemination of research products.
- ___ Develop and share dissemination products geared to specific users.
- ___ Plan to support those applying the knowledge gained (e.g., workshops, training, consultation, etc.).

Table 12.1 Continued

- ___ Assess the usage and impact of knowledge applied.
 - ___ Develop additional research project ideas based on knowledge gained.
 - ___ Vet research project ideas to ensure that they are applicable to the lives and practices of those affected.
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TOWARD FUTURE INVESTIGATION IN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Applied research, especially in the social sciences, historically has made use of both formal and informal partnerships. Conceptual models to describe such partnerships emerged several decades ago, and have since become one type of accepted research methodology (see chapter 1 for a review). In this sense, research partnerships are not new. On the other hand, there has recently emerged a new and broadly-based interest in partnerships as an effective, and often a preferred, way to carry out research to maximize both resources and opportunities for application. Such interest comes from those who fund research, university-based researchers, policy makers, and a wide variety of research users, including service providers and consumer groups. It is this recent interest that provides the thrust, both at the present time and in the future, to document success factors and challenges associated with various types of partnerships, to develop new theory and conceptual frameworks for research partnerships, and to collect and analyze data to evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships as a research methodology.

In addition to these three main focuses for future investigation in research partnerships, several more specific aspects emerged from the projects described in this book. Three of the most salient are highlighted here. First, an assumption that needs further investigation is that successfully completed research partnerships lead to setting new directions for research and to the partners actively pursuing new research funding and projects. There is a further assumption that the resulting research projects are most likely to be carried out in ways that build on the relationships established among partners. It is not clear to what degree this occurs or, if it does occur, to what degree it is beneficial to developing research or improving services.

Second, one of the principal advantages of using a research partnership model is often said to be that it provides a way for non-academic professionals and others to become exposed to, and trained in, accepted research methods. It also provides an opportunity for non-academic organizations to develop a research culture and to learn how to incorporate it into their structures and practices. The degree to which this occurs and the degree to which it is advantageous need to be critically examined.

Third, the costs and benefits of research partnership models need to be weighed. It is evident from the project descriptions in the previous chapters that establishing and maintaining partnerships is costly in terms of human resources required and additional time needed. This may be particularly true of conducting child welfare partnership research in Canada, where differing systems and geographical distance are important factors. At the same time, shared resources, in-kind support, and some expedited procedures may reduce actual costs. It has been pointed out several times throughout this book that many community organizations simply would not be able to bear the costs of carrying out research without university-based funding. The benefits related to increased skills and knowledge, resulting both from the research experience itself and from the application of results of the research, are more difficult to estimate. Still, development of some credible methods of balancing costs and benefits of research partnerships would help us to assess their feasibility from a point of view of allocating financial resources.

The need for continuing research on partnerships builds from the premise that, if partnership is a viable and preferred model for carrying out research in child welfare and related fields, there is a need to provide strong evidence to support the view that this is the case. Developing such an evidence base will require documentation and evaluation to be part of all research based on partnerships, and sharing evaluation results with broad audiences will be essential. This is precisely what the research partnerships described in this book set out to do. Sharing our experiences of partnership was the principal purpose in putting this book together, and doing so moves us a step along the path of providing evidence for what works in child welfare research.