

Social and political facilitation of research

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REFERENCE SOURCES are available for research enhancement in areas such as data examination,¹ response rate,² questioning,³ and creativity,⁴ but most of the literature on research contains little information regarding the negotiation process involved in the conduct of investigative activities. Yet, to carry out any study, close attention to complex relationships is required for such critical matters as approval by the host institution or organization, access to subjects, and availability of any other individuals whose support, permission, or assistance may be required.

More than a few worthy studies have been thwarted in the implementation stage by unanticipated disapprovals, prolonged delays in channeling requests, lack of staff cooperation, excessive subject refusals, or high attrition rate of subjects or other participants in the research. It is naive to presume that no unexpected and untoward

This work was supported in part by a grant from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Nursing, NU 00787-01.

0161-9268/83/0052-0009\$2.00
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events will occur in research work, but the investigator who strives to develop a careful groundwork of collaboration and support will be able to keep these counterproductive happenings to a minimum. This facilitative process involves the integration of interpersonal relationships (social aspect) with knowledge of the power structure within organizational and institutional systems (political aspect).

SOCIAL ASPECT

The interactional process in the negotiation and facilitation of research takes into consideration the need to understand the perspective of those participating in the study or permitting the research. What does the research project mean to them? Individuals constantly define meanings in terms of themselves.³ Blumer's symbolic interactionist approach to human conduct, which deals with meaning and behavior, is based on three premises. The first premise is that "human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them."^(p2) Blumer defines *things* as everything that the human being may note in their world such as physical objects, other human beings, institutions, guiding ideas, activities, and situations. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, social interaction. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by persons in dealing with the things they encounter.⁶

Since voluntary cooperation of the institution and subjects must be obtained, the researcher must understand their perspective of the study and, in a sense, win over

willing participants. The investigator needs to have empathy for the research subjects and be aware of the demands or effects that participation will have on them. The subjects or participants should comprehend the study sufficiently to sense what the involvement will mean to them in terms of commitment and benefit (or risk, if appropriate). The goal is a mutually respectful working relationship.

POLITICAL ASPECT

Establishing research relationships inevitably means that negotiations are necessary on individual, group, and/or organizational levels. Negotiation within organizational systems has a sociopolitical basis. Bacharach and Lawler promote the concept of organizations as politically negotiated orders.⁷ Within this view, organizational actors are perpetually bargaining, repeatedly forming and reforming coalitions, as well as constantly utilizing influence tactics. Any strategy to gain entry to and acceptance by an organization for the purpose of conducting a research study must consider that organizational life is dominated by an interplay of politics and power for control of resources. Furthermore, decision making within an organization is a highly political process.⁸ Access and approval for a study often involve decisions that are made at various levels of power and authority within an agency or institution.

The experienced researcher does considerable advance groundwork before making any formal requests. To the extent feasible, as much information as possible about the official organizational structure is obtained. Then, insofar as it is professionally

ethical and appropriate, knowledge is sought regarding the informal system of hierarchical power, interest groups or coalitions, historical information, and current priorities and conflicts. Such background data assist the researcher to analyze the mutuality or conflict potential of study priorities in relation to organizational goals and conditions. For example, if program evaluation is an immediate and critical need in a facility, a staff job satisfaction

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study is apt to garner little interest at the administrative level at that particular time. The presentation of an inquiry or research request should be organized toward the development of congruent goals and a productive relationship.

PHASES

For purposes of clarity, an arbitrarily linear view of the research facilitation process will be presented. In real circumstances, experienced researchers understand that ongoing work involves a smooth integration of the social and political factors. There are also many overlapping, repeated activities, and concurrent efforts in many directions rather than discrete phases during the implementation of a study.

Exploration of mutuality

Prior to formulating a complete and detailed research proposal, a search of past work in the area of interest using literature review is a basic step. Replication of completed work is a possibility, but duplication is to be avoided. The literature can also be a rich source for ideas that build on previous results. It is the rare researcher who can invent entirely new notions for investigation.

Armed with the foregoing information and a tentative study proposal, queries as to possible sites for the proposed study area are the next logical move. People in some locations may be ready and enthusiastic about a certain research problem, especially if their needs happen to coincide with the researcher's interest. Others may be less interested or inclined to permit a study to be conducted due to a variety of reasons such as reorganization or staffing problems. Still others may suffer a form of research saturation because of proximity to universities and colleges with endless numbers of student and faculty investigators. The investigator should be prepared to present the significance of the research question or problem with precision and its potential contribution to knowledge with clarity. This promotion of the merit of the study can be instrumental in gaining permission for the research project.

The investigator's exploratory visits can be occasions to examine the fit between the study and potential hosts for the research. The proposal should be developed adequately for presentation as to purpose, specific aims, hypothesis (if appropriate), and methodology, including sampling and preliminary analysis. The interpersonal and organizational character-

- 12 istics should be assessed for compatibility with the scope of the study. For example, a large and extensive research study would probably be overwhelming and unwelcome to a modest-sized agency with a small close-knit staff. The mutuality of benefits needs to be examined. Researchers may know what they will learn but must consider the benefits for the cooperating organization. What will they gain? Will the benefit be immediate as with program evaluation or future-oriented as with a staff job satisfaction study? Will it help the subjects directly, indirectly, or will society in general be the beneficiary?

The capability of the potential research site to incorporate or tolerate the demands of research such as time, space, subject acquisition, work disruption, and the like, in addition to ongoing activities, is an important factor. Few, if any, organizations can afford to devote enough effort or time to match the researcher's dedication to the project.

Throughout this phase, it should be kept in mind that while the researcher is busy evaluating the potential of the site, the behavior of the researcher is also being assessed. At this point, it is advisable to leave the possibility for a research study open and flexible without firm commitment to further refine the proposal and examine the fit. Nonetheless, a definite follow-up time should be arranged so that the researcher does not leave the site with a totally uncertain future for either party.

Formulation of the proposal

Assuming that study possibilities are fairly certain, the proposal can now be developed more fully and in greater detail,

with specifics such as time frame, base population number, sample number, and host and investigator responsibilities. Funding sources can be explored and grant proposals written. Since support letters can strengthen grant applications, the exploratory phase activities also serve to promote helpful interrelationships for any ensuing letters of endorsement that may be needed.

Formal and informal negotiations

After the research proposal is completed and perhaps a grant application submitted, more intensive negotiations are undertaken. Some of these contacts may be formal, as with host institutional reviews for human subject risks and seeking necessary administrative approvals from nursing and medical directors of service or research. Others may be informal (but equally critical), such as meeting with the supervisor of a particular nursing staff of interest or a community board member of an organization with strong influence.

Obviously, the hierarchical structure, especially the decision-making levels, of any system involved in a study must be known to a researcher to be certain that communication channels are followed meticulously. Interpersonal relationships can be jeopardized and key persons offended when inappropriate and out-of-order moves are made. On the other hand, knowledge of an informal network of personally powerful individuals can be helpful. Not infrequently, the public and private power structure may vary considerably. Significant persons who have developed internal leadership positions can open or shut doors to research opportunities.

Pilot project

At this point, assuming that permission was granted, a small trial or exploratory study can be valuable to both the seasoned researcher and the novice. Many unanticipated problems can be worked out and flaws in the methodology or instrument corrected without jeopardy to a large and more complex project. Further refinement of the research protocol is possible at this time and usually needed. In addition, results of a pilot study can support a grant proposal strongly while adding experience and knowledge to the investigator's credit.

Continuing relationships

As the research project gets underway, a point too often overlooked in the frenetic implementation activities is the maintenance of working relationships. Keeping authority figures informed as to the progress (not premature results) of the research serves to maintain their interest. Seeking feedback from many persons in various organizational levels increases a wider sense of involvement. This often takes on a personal and social nature. Many lasting and valued friendships have begun in this manner. While this may not be appropriate or desirable in every situation, if a natural tendency for friendly relationships occurs, it can be most rewarding as long as it does not create a conflict of interest situation.

Enough cannot be said about the building and maintenance of the researcher's credibility. This means unblemished trustworthiness in all interaction aspects, arriving promptly for appointments, following through on promises and commitments, and maintaining confidentiality even under

relentless probing. Common courtesies also need to be observed, such as appreciation for time given over to research-related activities, usually over and above ordinary responsibilities. Acknowledgment of interest often results in surrogate observers or additional information, as when the researcher is greeted with, "You should have been here yesterday. Guess what happened?"

Termination

When the study is completed, it is customary and a courtesy to provide a verbal and/or written report of the findings. Letters of appreciation should be sent promptly. Research sites have been known to allow no further investigations because of inappropriate behavior on the part of a previous researcher. Complaints have included such serious accusations as misuse of data or breach of confidentiality. Much more commonly, however, it is not such blatantly unprofessional conduct but the lack of attention to social amenities that gives the research subjects or host organization the impression of being exploited. Leaving the host institution with a positive impression regarding research will benefit the hosts as a pleasant and productive experience as well as investigators that may follow.

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CASE ILLUSTRATION

An interdisciplinary study was undertaken by the author and a colleague to examine the effect of nurses' follow-up on the enhancement of dental care visits of school children. The two investigators were state university members (nursing and dental schools). The dentist was also assistant chief of the dental health bureau of a nearby county health department, and the subjects were school children in a local school district within this county. This meant that three separate institutions or agencies (state university, county health agency, and local school district) were involved, which increased the complexity of relationships.

Our initial goal was to develop a study proposal that would incorporate the combined interests of school and public health nursing and dental referral outcomes. As any researcher knows, clear problem focus is the most consistently difficult aspect of proposal development. This took over 6 months of discussion.

Our final decision was to examine the effect of customary follow-up nursing services on the outcome of dental referrals after school-based dental screening. The nurse researcher (NR) contacted two school district nursing supervisors initially through a senior school nurse acquaintance who was well respected in the study school district. She was a key person who had built up considerable credibility and power, even though she did not function at the administrative level. This was an informal method of contact, gaining entry with the support of a mutually known and trusted person within the system.

Reluctance to be overcome

It was interesting to learn that the nurse supervisors had a somewhat negative view of dental screenings that had been conducted by the county health department with which the dental researcher (DR) was associated. The reasons were due mainly to the lack of inclusion of nurses in the planning stage, with expectations later of full and enthusiastic participation by the school nurses. An unexpected response was the comment that they were pleased that a nurse was the principal investigator. The supervisors were most helpful with suggestions and strongly endorsed and supported the study. The school physician located administratively above the supervisors in the school district structure also had a county health agency association and a working relationship with the DR. Therefore, the DR contacted him and received a supportive response. The research question, ie, examining the effects of a nursing field service, was a specific interest and priority need of the school nurses who were hard put to prove cost effectiveness in the face of budget cuts.

Formulation of plans

Discussions with all concerned were continued to complete plans for a pilot study the following school year. The supervisors assisted in the plans for operationalization and provided considerable information regarding the school district organizational structure, as well as the best method of requesting approval for the study. Factors such as timing, written protocol, levels, and channeling for maximum support were areas about which those

external to the district would have little knowledge. Their insight undoubtedly expedited the school approvals through the district research department, administrative offices, and the board of education.

The NR and DR concurrently secured institutional approval for human subjects research and intramural funding. The nurse supervisors and the NR conducted discussions and training sessions with the nurse and school selected to be in the pilot project. Meanwhile, the DR organized the dental screening component, using his county agency staff and certain school personnel.

As the research proceeded, a constant exchange of information served to increase a sense of participation on the part of everyone involved. Strategies such as requesting feedback, additional information, advice, or simply informing individuals about the progress of the study were used. These actions were genuinely helpful to the research process and served as well to enrich the pool of background and anecdotal information needed by the researcher.

At the conclusion of the study, verbal and written reports were sent to all school and agency staff directly involved in the research and to the superintendent of the school district. For many months, members of the nursing staff of the district continued their contacts with the NR and the DR. The groundwork developed for and by the study resulted in collective motivation for further research collaboration. A considerably larger replication currently in process was planned and federally funded by the Division of Nursing.

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However well developed a research proposal may be, negotiations with the social and political leadership of host organizations to develop necessary support for the study can be critical to its implementation. A phased process incorporating these relationships was presented in an effort to identify important factors. Each researcher eventually develops a style that is compatible with personal characteristics, but there are sufficient commonalities that can be identified as basic elements that will enhance and facilitate research.

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