Learning from Different Kinds of Research Partnerships

Research partnerships have become common in areas of research that vary widely. By scrutinizing these diverse partnerships, we can begin to see many different models, questions, and issues. Think of this a bit like “selection” opportunities. Let’s not focus on just one model too early. Below are some examples.

**Environmental Justice Partnerships:** The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences has funded many different environmental health and environmental justice partnerships. NIEHS required that the partnerships include health providers, underserved groups, and researchers. The goal was to try to understand health issues affecting underserved groups.

**Education Partnerships:** Researchers have begun to try to understand what works to improve educational performance. In doing so, they have begun to work with stakeholders of many different types.

**Urban Research Partnerships:** Places like CURL and organizations like PRAG have entered into partnerships to address urban problems of all sorts. Phil Nyden who helped to create these will be visiting the campus Sept 21 and we will have a terrific opportunity to learn from him.

**Science Shops:** This is an approach especially common in the European Union. The stakeholders bring questions to science shops usually linked to universities.

**HUD-funded community partnerships:** HUD’s Office of University Partnerships funded community-university partnerships. Only a certain percentage of the partnership effort could focus on research and the research had to be short-term research (not long term) and was expected to show immediate effects.

**Translational Research:** The National Institute of Health is promoting what is being called translational research. Most of this happens in partnership. The focus is on research that readily translates into practice.

**Community Psychology:** This is an example of a discipline that is trying to think about how to carry out collaborative research.

**Action-Oriented Research, Community-Based Participatory Research, Participatory Action Research, Citizen Science:** These are all variants of approaches that involve researchers and others working together on research problems and issues.

**Others with which you are familiar?**
Issues and Dilemmas: Stakeholder-Researcher Partnerships

Some dilemmas are commonplace in stakeholder-researcher partnerships. These issues come up regardless of the type of partnership or the topic the partnership is addressing. We will focus on these dilemmas throughout the course. Our goal will be to study them and perhaps make progress in addressing them. Below I have listed some of these dilemmas. My hope is that you will add others as we learn together in the course.

1. A researcher may come the partnership with a set program of research. This research plan may not parallel the concerns or needs for research by the stakeholders. It is hard to find the common ground.

2. Researchers could have different goals (advancing science) than do the stakeholders (solving pressing problems). Finding ways to reconcile these differences remains a challenge.

3. Researchers use new tools and modeling techniques that may be unavailable or unfamiliar to stakeholders and could lead to differences in approach.

4. Researchers and stakeholders may not always use the same comparison practices (length of time, what is a relevant comparison, use of variability information).

5. Researchers and stakeholders may not be “on the same page” about when data are seen as sufficiently complete to inform policy.

6. Time urgency may differ for stakeholders and researchers. The stakeholders may sense urgency around policy deadlines, legislative deadlines, etc. Researchers may be more concerned with the consequences of acting before all of the data is in.

7. Stakeholders are often acutely aware of the differences among them (as a result of position, experience, etc) but less aware of the differences among researchers; the opposite may be true for researchers (they are aware of how they different from each other they are but not so attuned to the differences among stakeholders).

8. Is there something about the training of researchers that makes it difficult for them to enter into partnership research effectively? What factors (individual research, little focus on solutions, little time pressure, heavy emphasis on publication that speaks only to other researchers) and what can we do about this?

9. There is a fear among some researchers that partnership approaches to research lead to inferior research. What leads to this view and how could it be tested?

10. Some topics may benefit more from a partnership approach to research than do others. Which topics? What factors would lead certain topics to benefit more from a partnership approach?

11. Temporal issues may be very important in the establishment of effective partnerships. What temporal issues? How can they be addressed?
Questions about Stakeholder-Researcher Partnerships

1. Do certain science problems and issues lend themselves to partnership approaches? Which problems?
2. Does the particular topic seem to matter for what works (vernal pools, crime prevention, child health partnerships)?
3. What innovations seem to come from partnerships that are not possible in the absence of partnerships?
4. Is there an optimal size, number of participants for successful partnerships?
5. Do successful partnerships have to be face-to-face or can “virtual” be successful? Under what conditions can the latter work? What is important for them to increase their likelihood of success? Using new media?
6. Do metaphors, analogies, and the like help? Hurt? How would we know? NYT (August 22): “Wait long enough, it seems, and science captures up with the metaphor.”
7. How do we know when a partnership has been successful? What constitutes success?
8. People drop in and out of partnerships. What sustains partnerships over time? Should they be sustained? Should they have “sunset” laws?
9. What are the pros and cons of introducing modeling into partnerships (social networking, agent-based modeling)?
10. What literatures are relevant to understanding and improving partnerships? How would you draw on these literatures?