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**Negotiating Peace and Power in an Interdisciplinary Research Team:
A Case Study**

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ABSTRACT

Problem: Interdisciplinary research (IR) teams are a fertile ground for conflict.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to analyze the interpersonal interactions of an IR team and steps taken when conflict interfered with the team's work.

Framework: Concepts from Chinn's feminist praxis model, *Peace & Power*, were used as a guide for conflict resolution.

Sample: This is a case study of one IR team, composed of five researchers from two disciplines (i.e. nursing and social work). The controversial IR topic, experience of gay men and lesbians in long-term care facilities, was relevant to both disciplines.

Procedure: When overwhelming conflict interrupted the team's work, the principal investigator called a meeting to discuss factors contributing to disagreement and discontent. An audio-record of the two-hour session was transcribed by a neutral party. The transcript was checked for veracity against the original recording. Constant comparison was used to analyze the data.

Results: These five categories emerged from narrative analysis of the transcript. These included *revealing threats to personal and professional identity, embracing conflict, accepting personal responsibility, engaging the process, and building team cohesion.*

Conclusion: Collaboration was enhanced by negotiating the politics of identity, valuing diversity, improving communication and building trust. Bridging the cultural divide between disciplines improves IR team productivity.

Keywords: interdisciplinary research, collaboration, social work, nursing, case study, conflict resolution, diversity

Negotiating Peace and Power in an Interdisciplinary Research Team: A Case Study

Introduction

Academic nursing supports an initiative for interdisciplinary research (IR) teams. These teams are formed to bring together experts from various disciplines to solve problems, share tools and concepts, increase research productivity and improve product value. Little direction is available as to how IR teams are formed and sustained. Although some academic disciplines accept the concept of IR teams, attempts to develop IR teams are not always successful. Once formed many IR teams fail to achieve meaningful outcomes.^{1,2}

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the interpersonal interactions of an IR team and steps taken when conflict interfered with the team's work.

Literature Review

Despite the fact they are poorly understood,³ IR teams are not new. Task-oriented teams have long been reported in the literature.⁴⁻⁷ They have been called various names, such as collaborative teams, special projects, and task forces.³ Despite the documented challenges posed by forming such teams, the number is increasing along with knowledge complexity and funding for collaborative research.^{1,9,10} Although team members share responsibility for the outcome,³ the Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research (CFIR) recognized the importance of leaders with effective communication and team building skills to bring disciplines together. The American Nurses Association (ANA) formally recognized the complexity of nursing research and its holistic scope by encouraging IR research in 1980.⁹ Development of IR teams is an integral component of National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines.^{2,11}

Table 1

Structural Elements of an Interdisciplinary Research Team

- Selection of members and stable membership^{4,9,21}
- Committed leadership;¹ commitment of members to the team¹⁴
- Formalized team structure^{4,9,10,15}
- Group size²¹
- Empowerment (i.e., ability to make decisions and be responsible for decisions)³²
- Clear conceptual framework,^{1,12} method⁹ & common goals²¹
- Adequate resources^{1,2,7,9,10}
- Appropriate management of meetings³²

Table 2

Process Consideration of Interdisciplinary Research Teams

- Excellent communication (e.g. plain language, avoiding academic jargon, regular meetings);¹ feedback³²
- Open discussion of agreements^{6,7}
- Atmosphere of trust and respect^{1,32}
- Building bridges¹⁰
- Mentoring¹²
- Producing outcomes^{1,9,14} and explicit agreement about authorship and outcomes^{12,14}

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Table 3

Reported Pros and Cons of Interdisciplinary Research Teams

Structure/Process	Pros	Cons
Formal structure, power, & leadership	Diverse expertise; ⁸⁻¹⁰ Multiple leaders on a team possible to demonstrate skills and lead group; ^{4,8,10,12,21} readily available peer review and critique; ⁹ division of labor ^{10,21}	Only one principle investigator allowed for many funding agencies ² ; uncertainty should PI change institutions as grant follows PI; ⁴ changing team member commitments or team membership; ⁹ lack in clarity of formal structure – meaning divisions of labor, systems of evaluation and authority ¹⁵
Organizing framework, method, & goals	More integrated and comprehensive findings; ¹ insight gained by examining problem from multiple angles; richer interpretation; ¹² intellectual stimulation, accuracy; ²¹ common problem to solve and establishing a team philosophy, considering possible outcomes at the beginning ¹⁰	Deciding on conceptual models; ² complexity of research methods ⁹ Philosophical differences ^{8,30}
Resources	Adequate facilities enhance performance; 7 Seed/glue money ¹⁰	Demanding of resources ¹ More expensive to implement ⁹ Demanding of time ^{1,8} and patience; ¹ time increases with size of team; ⁹ takes longer; ¹ designation of workload or credit; equitable budgetary disbursement; ²

		space ⁸
Communication	Open Communication fosters effective process & task accomplishment ^{7,9}	Hard to develop a common language and knowledge base; ^{2,8} vocabulary not always transferable across disciplinary boundaries, problems involved in fostering communication among team members are often underestimated; ¹⁵ dealing with expectations and misunderstandings; ² group may focus on process rather than content, conflict and disharmony, personality, consensus may be difficult ⁹
Mentoring	Careers thrive, mentorship for less experienced researchers, members cover for each other; ⁹ team socialization ¹⁴	Failure to match interests & personality styles; failure to mitigate cultural differences ^{10,30}
Trust & respect,	Encourages collaboration and the willingness to take risks ¹⁰	Unequal status of team members; ^{15,22} overcoming identity conflict ¹⁴
Productivity	Better results; ¹ increased productivity with more members reading, presenting and writing, increased amount and quality of information, maximize potential to improve clinical outcomes; ⁹ strengthening links between research and policy; ¹ links research and practice, access to multiple settings; frugal use of resources and effort; shared workload; ⁹ knowledge production ¹⁴	Interfere in personal research goals; ^{4,9} incompatible with traditional academic systems for rewarding scholarship; ^{7,14} negative attitudes ⁷

The current literature recommends key elements for a successful IR team. These elements are related to structure and process of such teams. See Tables 1 and

2. Most information about the inner workings of IR teams comes from published case studies, particularly in which teams from several institutions work together on large federally funded multi-year projects. Table 3 summarizes specific pros and cons reported in the literature. Most reports in the literature are descriptive case studies.^{2,3,5-7,12-15} Several frameworks are applied to explain team dynamics, including systems theory,¹⁶ communities of practice,¹⁷ cultural and symbolic capital,¹⁸ structure,¹⁹ and evaluation.²⁰

Conflict within Teams

IR teams are a fertile ground for conflict. Eaton referred to inter-professional teamwork as “an experience in group therapy for each participant”.^{21p709} Members must feel secure in their personal relations to tolerate criticism from others. Rogers-Dillon recognized that hardships and hazards may be an inevitable aspect of team building and maintenance, and she recommends “hazard pay” to compensate group members.²¹

As disciplinary theories and philosophical differences become ego extensions for those who hold them, the whole process can deteriorate into an ego struggle.²¹ Personality factors (e.g., idiosyncrasies, incompatibilities, values, training, and motivation) come into play, and members may not share identification with the process. What begins as a professional relationship can quickly become more personal, yet much behavior is covert. Partially aware of what is happening within the team, members may experience difficulty identifying and addressing key issues.¹⁴

Conceptual Framework

Chinn’s *Peace and Power* model can be used in classrooms, committees, workshops, coalitions, or as a research framework.²³ It is specifically designed to build meaningful relationships and effective ways of working together. Because it is intended to overcome all types of imbalances of power and is based on each team member sharing responsibility for success or failure, it is most successful when hierarchical traditions are not strong. The processes are designed to overcome dynamics within groups that set up advantages for some and disadvantages for others.

Chinn describes four basic components of the *Peace and Power* process: checking-in, rotating chair, value-based decision-building, and closing.²³ Within each of these components specific approaches are recommended for transforming conflict. The process can be adapted to meet the needs of specific groups. The four components of Chinn’s model are described below:

- **Checking-In:** Participants briefly share expectations and their degree of willingness to be a present and contribute to the process. Checking-in also includes sharing circumstances or events likely to influence one’s

- participation during discussions, reflecting on what participants gained from previous meetings, and saying what they want to see on the agenda.
- Rotating chair: Although each meeting has a convener who presents an agenda, whoever is speaking is the chair. Each participant is asked to identify conflicts or misunderstandings but not rush to premature resolution. During this stage *circling* can be incorporated, where group discussion can be suspended and everyone in the group takes a turn to speak to the issue. This “stop out” helps to ensure all voices are heard. Participants listen without interrupting or cutting others off.
 - Value-based decision building: The focus is on both the quality of the process and the quality of decisions, assuring that the best possible decisions are made. Characteristics include flexible options; using disagreements to build understanding; nurturing understanding, insight and wisdom for all members; bringing together different perspectives; cultivating collective memory of group values and how to put values into action, and reducing misunderstanding about the meaning of the decisions.
 - Closing: Each participant speaks, including statements of appreciation, critical reflection to produce constructive insights about the processes of the group, and affirmation to move forward with the group’s work and individual growth.²³

Chinn’s feminist praxis model provided a natural transition from a *laissez faire* style of leadership to one in which leadership was fully shared. *Peace and Power* principles²³ served as a guide for resolving conflict in the IR team.

Method

Case study research utilizing groups is reflected in the literature review. The case study method is often used when it can offer insight into a unique situation or when researchers want to know more about a particular phenomenon within a real-life context.²⁴ The single-case allows researchers to generalize to other cases representing similar theoretical conditions.^{25,26} The investigators chose the case study method in order to maintain the richness and complexity of the situation.^{25,27}

Sample

The team of five researchers was a diverse group. Some differences included discipline (nursing and social work), sexual orientation (lesbian/gay and heterosexual), age, gender, and academic status. All members were employed within the same college of a medium-sized private university in the southwest. Though most team members knew each other as colleagues within the university, they had not worked together as a research team. The team members self-selected based on their knowledge and experience within the research areas of gerontology and sexual minorities. The topic of research, experience of gays

and lesbians in long-term care facilities, was relevant to both the disciplines of nursing and social work.

Because there is much overlap between the practice and theory of nursing and social work, the two disciplines do not seem disparate on the surface. As a result nursing and social work scholars assume they have the same beliefs and understanding about vulnerable populations and the way these populations should be served. However, team members misunderstood and minimized differences including the breadth and depth of their respective disciplines.

Disciplinary differences were not clearly analyzed, and assumption of familiarity contributed to conflict. Team members brought different levels of personal commitment and professional expertise, but it took a while to gain mutual respect. Roles and rules were unclear, and personal investment in the research topic was unequal. Other areas of conflict included blending previously formed research partnerships and calibrating a balance of power and position.

Procedure

When it became evident that conflict was interrupting the work of the group, the principal investigator called a meeting to openly discuss personal and professional issues that were becoming detrimental to the team's work. The assumption was open discussion would neutralize the conflict and strengthen the group for maximum productivity. The goal of team discussion was to promote value-based decision-building with the expectation that resolution of disagreements would build understanding and promote effective group process.

Once a meeting date was set, the team agreed to utilize concepts from Chinn's *Peace and Power*²³ to provide structure and processes to conduct the meeting. All team members agreed to audio-record the 1.25 hour session which was later transcribed by a neutral party. A copy of the transcript was provided to each team member to check its veracity. Two members accepted responsibility for validating the transcript against the original recording. The confirmed transcript was used for analysis

Analysis

Narrative data analysis²⁸ served to identify the themes represented within the group discussion. Constant comparison²⁹ was used to analyze the transcript. The researchers compared their interpretation of the transcript, between readings and among members. Data were sorted using linguistic expressions, e.g. words or phrases, and the emerging template of categories and themes underwent constant revision as the transcript was read and reread by researchers. Data comparison continued until themes became redundant and theoretically relevant categories were refined.

Findings

Two investigators conducted the initial analysis. Final interpretation was shared with all team members for consensus. Five major categories for resolving conflict and achieving outcomes emerged:

- Revealing threats to identity
- Embracing conflict
- Accepting personal responsibility
- Engaging the process
- Building team cohesion

Revealing Threats to Identity

Threats to personal and professional identity were revealed through expressions of insecurity, a focus on rules, and feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and exclusion. Some team members found comfort in interjecting their expertise, identifying their passion for and commitment to research, confirming their position and status, and searching for ways to contribute. For instance, a team member said:

My primary strength is in long-term care of older people, and if that is helpful, I want to participate, because that is my thing--not all the theoretical kinds of things...and not the gay and lesbian [subject matter]...I just appreciate being able to participate with this research considering the fact that I have been around this [organization] for . . . years.

Another team member stated:

There is that power thing.... I have to think about what the power relation are... and how to negotiate them. ... In the first couple of years I had to feel out where that was....I refer to you as an icon because you are a pretty big hitter around here, and that is respected. I know my place. I am little league.

Embracing Conflict

Threats to identity created conflict. Direct manifestations of conflict included making casual accusations and innocently treading on unknown sensitivities. When conflict dominated the discussion, participants found comfort and safety through changing the subject and pursuing the trivial. Hot button topics included career aspirations, reverence for lesbian and gay issues, and the delicate, judicious use of controversial language. For example, a team member stated:

That's an old message: 'You are only valuable because of your looks. You have nothing substantial to offer.' After that comment, although I laughed at the moment, I walked away stung. I don't think it was your intention at all, but I felt

zapped by the old message... I needed to have the courage to say something, because I don't think you were trying to trivialize or marginalize me. It was just one of those moments when I had trouble, feeling belittled and hurt.

Team members courageously addressed difficult issues, clarified their stances without defending them, and used humor. For example, a team member remarked "thank you for reminding me that I am the only assistant professor in this group and that you all will be making decisions about my future" (group laughter). Other strategies for dealing with conflict and misunderstanding included checking things out, providing empathy, and revealing disappointment in others. A team member stated:

I guess I still have a concern about whether or not you understood what I said, and I want to know that you are okay with it....I don't know if you heard my apology....I am concerned that you heard me and that it is okay.

Another team member spoke:

There are going to be sensitive issues, and sometimes there will be insider knowledge or insider experiences that we have to tread around gently. We talked before about the use of the word 'queer' ...about who can use that term and how they use it.

Clarifying emotions and ideas through frank dialogue led group members closer to conflict resolution and confirmed personal and professional differences.

Accepting Personal Responsibility

To be successful, IR teams require various resources. In addition to physical and fiscal resources, team members' willingness to accept responsibility provides the means necessary for groups to resolve conflict and meet performance outcomes. Personal responsibility included revealing vulnerabilities, confessing mistakes and errors, and drawing insight from spirituality. A team member shared:

I am struggling with this. I want to be part of this research team, and I think we all bring skills that are complementary. But I certainly do not want you to feel scapegoated. I don't want you to feel marginalized. Having spent time being marginalized . . . as a lesbian and a Jew, I realized, if I am doing that to somebody else, then shame on me....My life has been about working to make diversity respected and to overcome oppression. So that is my struggle....You know in Judaism there is a term which means "speaking evil", and part of the teaching . . . is that you are just as responsible for evil listening as for evil speaking... so I have disappointed myself in being part of that process. I don't want to do that.

Recognizing culpability and revealing disappointment in self were ways that team members took risks and accepted responsibility. For instance, a team member said:

I claim responsibility too, because I listened and I let people share things outside the context of this group. I believe my intention was sincere and I had a genuine reason for doing it, but I don't know what need it met.... It became clear to me that it was not going to do any good for the group if I kept hearing from some, then from others, and tried to mediate. I didn't want to be in that position, and so that is why I called this meeting.

Group members owned their contributions to the emergence of group conflict. Taking ownership and responsibility for previous actions and admitting weakness were strengths used by group members to propel conflict resolution.

Engaging the Process

Team members demonstrated commitment to engage the process by thinking aloud, offering solutions, expressing gratitude, and respectfully relating to others. A team member observed:

I think you are critical to this research project by having lived the study. Without you we would be clueless, and we might produce something that is very off track. So, I appreciate the fact that you bring something from a different perspective to the table...I have a commitment to learn.

Another team member stated:

I am not sure why it is that I seem to want to get stuff in the open right now, but I think that we need to be clear, to have different and more honest relationships. So, here I am . . . having to develop new kinds of relationships with people.

The consequences of clearing the air and venting honest emotion included increasing confidence, trust and a willingness to accept uncertainty. A team member expressed optimism "that we will be able to pull together a more solid kind of team. I don't even know what that will look like, but to feel a little more cohesive." This team member appreciated the opportunity:

..to get this out in the open and to deal with it. Trust! That's kind of a theme here, and I think it is what we are trying to do or build for this group. I am proud to have the courage to say what I didn't know I was going to be able to say.

Stronger commitment to the team was achieved as members engaged the process to develop a new and stronger group identity. Trust was both a prerequisite and an outcome of the process. Attempts to clarify the team's structure and direction enhanced conflict resolution.

Building Team Cohesion

Attempts to resolve conflict touched the team members on personal and professional levels, moving the team toward cohesion. The process involved appreciating differences, sharing intimacies, and flexibly transferring leadership from one team member to another. A team member said:

I guess I am not clear when you say expectations. Do you mean expectations of the group process or expectations of the outcome of this research? ... I hope I can help this group in some way...It was kind of hard to separate what we were going to do from how we were going to do it.

Team members moved toward cohesion by sharing their expectations, setting boundaries, renegotiating rules, and seeking unity. One team member confessed:

I feel better now that I have said this, and I do think I can do this again. I had a hard time letting you know. I can laugh, I can play, but I am not going to let you see me [hurt]. That is just part of my armor. I will let you know because we are a team, and this is important to all of us.

Another team member consoled:

Even friends hurt each other. I think even in friendship you learn sensitivities that you didn't know were there, but you tell the other person, you go over it, you may joke about it later, but you still respect it.

By attending to others concerns, doubts and anxieties, using caution and affirming others' experience, team members were able to set an agenda and commit to the task. A team member stated:

I do not care what kind of lifestyle someone lives as long as it is consensual and does not hurt anyone else... I am aware of things that are not consensual and hurtful. So all of us have experiences we bring to the table. They just don't happen to be the same. I know what it is like to be marginalized. So in terms of objectivity and passion, I have the passion [for the research]. You are able to share perspectives I don't have. That's helpful. That is the balance of this team.

Individual team members found value in discovering commonalities as well as differences. Sharing intimacies contributed to mutual understanding and appreciation of diversity among team members. Group conflict was transformed to solidarity.

Discussion

“The commonest cause of underperformance of IR is the failure of a team to gel or function collaboratively”.^{10p53} Chinn’s *Peace and Power* principles²³ helped the IR team to achieve conflict resolution by refocusing and uniting members toward a common cause. The cultural divide existing between disciplines (i.e. nursing and social work) was bridged as diversity and value-based decision building were promoted. Resolving personal and professional conflicts was a major step to building a cohesive team that could achieve research goals.

Chinn provided an effective method for working with IR team conflict. In addition to the innovative use of Chinn’s model,²³ study findings confirmed several concepts present in the literature. Team cohesion was enhanced by negotiating the politics of identity,¹⁴ valuing diversity,²¹ fostering effective communication,⁹ and building trust.^{10,15}

Identity

In exploring the problems of group formation, tensions arise from failure to make decisions that reflect different points of view and diverse identities.^{14,23} In order to reduce conflict, threats to identity were recognized including power relations, insecurity, feelings of exclusion, and helplessness. The most striking power differential in this case arose between two tenured team members.

Ironically, a male felt threatened by a female because she held positions of authority in the college and her department with a long history of service to the university. The male felt objectified and undervalued. He expressed deference to the female who had previously chaired a powerful university committee. A perceived imbalance of power fed apprehension about assignment of leadership roles and influence on decision making. However, the politics of identity were successfully negotiated by respecting *Peace and Power* principles.²³

Diversity

Although disciplinary boundaries can interfere with effective group functioning,^{2,8,9} members of IR teams must acknowledge that valuing diversity lays a foundation to resolving conflict.²³ Differences in theoretical, methodological, and experiential backgrounds can become ego extensions for individual group members.^{21,30} Realignment within and across disciplinary boundaries require a willingness to learn scientific language, theories and methods that may be unfamiliar. The cultural gap existing within IR teams often lead to their dissolution.¹⁰ Blending expertise and surrendering the security of special knowledge bridge this gap.

In contemporary society, expertise in a narrow field of specialization has come to be valued over general knowledge.¹⁰ Even so, content experts acquiesced to the talents and special interests of others as team members recognized their complementary roles and skills. Insider-outsider considerations emerged when

team members expressed feelings of exclusion. Checking-in and closing provided opportunities for team members to recognize, honor and celebrate their diversity.

Communication

Communication is essential to ensure the longevity of IR teams and make the group process work. Feelings, ideas, and opinions shared openly and without censure helped to shape a group identity from individual identities, restructure disciplinary coalitions, and build trust.²³ For instance, individual team members recognized their own culpability in allowing communication breakdown through inaction. Direct and honest communication was required to make the issue of marginalization transparent allowing unfettered discussion, dialogue, and debate.²³ A special issue of *Nursing Outlook*³¹ examined the challenges of interdisciplinary research and distinguished the concepts of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work. Nursing and related disciplines are on the cusp of creating new theoretical frameworks and methods that embrace and synthesize disciplinary differences. Effective communication is key to this process.

Trust

Before members of an IR team can take the risks necessary to work together and meet common goals, they must experience a modicum of trust in themselves, other team members, and the group process. Commitment to *Peace and Power* principles²³ was essential to give structure and direction to the group, build cohesion, and resolve conflict.

Sharing insights from life experiences, acknowledging vulnerabilities, and revealing the self were evidence of trust building among team members. For instance, a team member expressed shame and guilt at having contributed to another's feelings of exclusion by participating in conversations outside formal group meetings. *Peace and Power* strategies such as the rotating chair, circling, and stopping out²³ encouraged team members to share insights and intimacies among team members.

Conclusion

Developing a productive IR team may present challenges,^{4,8,10,32} but IR teams can make a distinct contribution to emerging fields of study and provide practical answers to societal questions. This article addressed historical utilization of IR teams and conflict resolution. Chinn's *Peace and Power* model was the conceptual framework for a case study of one IR team involving the disciplines of nursing and social work. The novel use of Chinn's model provided a structure for addressing and resolving conflict in an IR team. Although Chinn's *Peace and Power*²³ model was used to frame the discussion, derivation of categories and

interpretation of findings arose directly from the transcript. Transcript analysis revealed five major categories for resolving conflict. These categories were a) revealing threats to identity, b) embracing conflict, c) accepting personal responsibility, d) engaging the process, and e) building team cohesion.

Social-science research has not elucidated the complex social and intellectual processes that make for successful IR. A deeper understanding of these processes will enhance the prospect for initiation and management of successful IR teams.¹⁰

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