

Tri County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes 2/8/11

Attendance: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change Counseling Center), Linda Castaneda (Manley Interventions), Justin Donovan (Allies), Taylor (Allies), Paul Lee (Men's Resource Center), Regina Rosann (Abuse Recovery Ministry and Services), Samantha Naliboff (VOA Home Free), Jennifer Warren, Johnnie Burt (ARMS), Wendy Viola (Portland State University), Ashley Boal (PSU), Aaron Potratz (Cedar Counseling)

Minutes by Ashley Boal, edited by Chris Huffine

Discussion: Co-ed Co-facilitation

The topic of the day is the use of coed co-facilitation, specifically: how people feel about it, what challenges there are, whether people find it helpful and what benefits and drawbacks are perceived.

There are challenges with ensuring male facilitators are exhibiting equality and recognizing their own sexist attitudes. Any sexism the male may have can play out during group and really injure the group dynamic. For example, it can put the female facilitator in the position where she is the "bad guy" for calling it out. When a male facilitator does something counterproductive it can be tricky to make the action a teaching moment without "calling out" your co-facilitator.

It may be helpful for potential co-facilitators to be interviewed by who they would be running groups with to try to screen for possible attitudes or styles that are not conducive to program goals. This has a lot to do with a feeling about the person, not necessarily their answer to a specific question. Openness to learning and willingness to self-examine are both very important qualities in this line of work.

There are also challenges when students serve as co-facilitators. This creates an inherent power differential with one facilitator being a paid, experienced staff member and the other being a student (possibly younger, less experienced, still learning). This can be problematic regardless of what gender the student is. When the student is female it may play into stereotypes of women being less knowledgeable, more passive. When a male is the student this could reinforce negative, sexist attitudes about women wanting to dominate or be in control. Providers can use this as a teaching opportunity. As a student you may have more leeway with the men and you may not be seen as the "bad guy" as often because you are not seen as the person in control. One thing facilitators can do is be explicit in saying the person is a student and why the student is so vital and why their perspective is important. At the same time, you also have to ensure you are not being patronizing and you are talking about what "we" do, versus what "I" do.

There can also be difficulties for female facilitators. As a female, you walk into a room of men with negative attitudes or hostility towards women and you are the only female target. Some providers have noticed that when female facilitators say something useful, the men may attribute it back to the male facilitator. Sometimes it feels as if words carry more weight when given by male facilitators. It may be easier for men at first to hear things from someone who is "like them" and then slowly get used to more and more different perspectives. One way to work on this in group is explicitly name who made the comment when discussing it to really underscore who it came from.

There can also be difficulties due to personality or service provision styles. It is important to have discussions with your co-facilitator so that there is communication about when certain

styles or personalities need to be adjusted (i.e., quieter person needs to be a bit more assertive in a certain instance so that there is equal distribution of more confrontational behaviors between facilitators). Passive facilitators can be difficult to work with because there should be an equal division of the facilitation. This doesn't have to do with what is actually spoken, it has to do with the weight or influence the individual has in the group. This is an issue for both male and female facilitators because passive female facilitators reinforce stereotypes of women as passive, while passive male facilitators reinforce stereotype of women trying to have control and be dominant. While many people grow over time and build confidence as a facilitator, some people are just too passive for this work especially because silence can be construed as collusion.

Facilitators need to remember that the men in groups are watching everything and so we need to be conscious of what things we are doing all the time. For instance, it may be important for facilitators to switch off who does paperwork every week so that it isn't view as the female always doing the paperwork or being the secretary.

It is important to have regular communication between facilitators inside and outside of group. Collaborating with your co-facilitator shows good role modeling of behavior and attitudes. When questionable comments come up from a facilitator, it is important to discuss those comments, either immediately or outside of groups. This is important so that both facilitators can continue to be critical about their own beliefs and can be honest with one another about their experiences. When female providers have discussed questionable comments with their co-facilitator they have found various degrees of receptivity depending on the co-facilitator.

When male-female co-facilitation works out, it can be a beautiful thing where you feel very invigorated and supported. When it isn't working it can be very challenging because you are always concerned about what the other facilitator is going to do or say.

Another issue is when one of the co-facilitators is also the owner of the agency and hence the employer of the other co-facilitator. The owner always has more power and when the owner is male that can be compounded. This can especially be an issue for small programs when there are only two facilitators and one of them is the owner. This can make it difficult to bring up issues or questionable comments with the owner co-facilitator.

We should also remember that it doesn't always have to do with gender. Other factors, such as age and experience, can influence how the group responds. In other words, sometimes the differential response of group members may be related to something other than the facilitator's gender. One example was given of a student facilitator being treated differently not because she was female but because she was young (and looked quite young). Another example was of a male facilitator who was offered more acknowledged by the group not because of his gender, but because of his deep experience.

Another way sexism can manifest within the group is traditional assumptions about parenting and gender. A more sexist perspective is that women are expected to have children and know about children, men are not expected to have this knowledge. As a result, group members may be quicker to presume the female facilitator is a parent and if she isn't to think less of her.

Facilitator gender may also intersect differently with other factors such as age. For example, women who are older (i.e., old enough to be a group member's mother) tend to get more respect than younger women (i.e., young enough to be a group member's romantic partner or daughter). Age appears to play less of a role with male facilitators. Group members are more likely to sexualize women who are close to their own age or younger than they are women who are significantly older.

Program participants may also treat women in different roles differently as well. They may behave quite differently with the front desk/administrative staff than they do with the group facilitators. Often times, their behavior with those staff is more revealing of their true beliefs.

Men may treat the female reception staff very differently (i.e., flirtatious comments) than they would the female co-facilitator. There is awareness by the men of the power difference of the facilitator vs. receptionist, they are able to filter themselves with a facilitator. These issues are very different when there is a male receptionist. Providers have also found that as a female student you receive a lot more inappropriate behavior (i.e., flirting) and this decreased a lot once they became a paid staff member. It raises the question about whether this is due to being a student or whether it has to do with a lack of confidence that the student gives off and men pick up on.

On the other hand clients may try to be inappropriate with male facilitators by trying to get them to be “buddy buddy” with them. Some men may act this way to be manipulative while others may be anxious and just feel that in those situations they want to be closer to someone (male or female), and sometimes men just want to be close to the power.

The question was raised about how female facilitators feel about being asked to give their female perspective. One female facilitator said that she likes when these situations come up because she can provide answers that are historically informed and relate to the ideas of patriarchy that the facilitators are trying to convey to the group. It is important to qualify comments as the person’s own opinion. It is necessary to reinforce this is one woman’s experience, not the experience of all women. Make sure there is a distinction between “a” woman and “the” woman. Talking about the opinions of “the” woman creates a situation of objectification and stereotyping. It plays into sexist thinking that there is A way that women are, creates assumption that men and women are so different that it is necessary to talk about what “the” women think.

Overall there seems to be a consensus that male-female co-facilitation is the way to go.

Challenges can arise financially and in finding qualified facilitators but this still seems to be preferred over other methods. There was general agreement that it is more challenging finding interested and qualified male facilitators than female facilitators.
