

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes June 14, 2016
CLINICAL/DISCUSSION

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Minutes by Kate Sackett, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic discussion: Co-facilitation

Today's discussion is intended to talk about the challenges and benefits of co-facilitation, both in general and with regards to the expectation that it be co-ed co-facilitation.

While the state standards require co-ed co-facilitation, some providers are not consistently doing that. One reason is the financial demands of paying two people to facilitate a single group. Another is finding a qualified person of each gender. Typically it's been more difficult to find qualified males than females. Related to this, culturally specific groups have even more of a challenge in recruiting qualified facilitators. Also, for many agencies, having co-facilitation is just financially impossible, especially with the kind of salaries that are out there. The work doesn't attract a lot of people, especially smaller agencies and in more rural outlying areas where it's just not financially possible at all. In those areas they feel lucky to have program and it seems much better to have the men have a program with one person than to have no program at all.

It was mentioned that while the preferred model is co-facilitation, single facilitation can actually work quite well. Prior to the state standards most groups in the state had single facilitation which worked well. People who are currently running groups alone say that it works just fine. So while there are certainly benefits to co-facilitation, it is not necessary for a group to be run well. One single female facilitator tries to compensate by bringing males into the groups to do presentations and have them interact.

There was some more focused discussion on the benefits of co-ed facilitation. It's sort of like the medium is the message. As a female, to be the female in the room and over the course of the program have clients open up and be more and more open to her influence directly in itself has a transformative effect. It was frustrating for a male facilitator when he was in the room and some of the men would defer to him ("Why don't you ask Katherine?").

One female reported that her experience with co-facilitation has been a mixed bag. She has some experiences of feeling validated, strong, and supported by a co-facilitator but even then the men naturally gravitated towards the male co-facilitator to ask questions and talk about problems. She does not have any problem with the men when she's alone in the room with them, she develops that relationship and it's not questioned. The worst times were with younger, inexperienced guys

in co-facilitation where a co-facilitator did not support her and then she ends up “looking like the bitch in the room.” Ideally co-facilitation would be the thing to do, but finding the right one is very hard to do. If it’s not a good match, she’d rather do it alone.

It is harder to find qualified men for this work. Men in general are less interested in the helping professions and supervisors are able to recognize that men need more work even from the interview. The pay is low, there are not many hours, so it’s harder to find qualified men than qualified women. In addition, there are fewer men who understand issues of sexism, male privilege, and oppression in general.

Related to recruiting qualified facilitators, it might be a broader issue in terms of the coordinated community response. There is not enough support on a national level or on a state level. In other places (like England and Australia) it’s supported by the government. Some rural communities have worked together as a community to identify and support agencies to do good work including recruiting competent group facilitators.

A related challenge is the underfunding in general of programs working with abusive partners. For example, locally there are limited subsidies, depending on the county and yet programs are expected to offer low fees or sliding scale fees to help working class attendees. This low compensation/financial support means relatively low pay for group facilitators. This is in contrast to other forensic programs such as substance abuse and sex offender treatment which get much more substantial financial support from the state. This makes it much more challenging to find and retain people to do the work.

Another challenge is that it often takes time to learn skilled group facilitation in general as well as how to use this particular model, which is distinct from many other group models. There’s a learning curve and it is also difficult to retain people when they are fully trained. It is a common struggle to do this, find talented and qualified people who get experienced and then go on to work elsewhere for better pay and benefits.

Another benefit to co-ed co-facilitation is it can be easier to observe and catch sexist behavior. One female said that she experiences a lot of gender-based microaggressions that she sees and her male co-facilitator doesn’t notice, so that’s been a great learning experience for him as a co-facilitator. This is common with microaggressions for the dominant group not to be as aware. The key to working well together then is whether the dominant group member is willing to learn. It is not always the case and this seems to influence bad co-facilitation pairings if the male co-facilitator is not willing to consider this (by minimizing, dismissing, and so forth the female co-facilitator’s experience). It seems that certain qualities in male facilitators can help with this. For example, does he have a certain level of humility--is he open and willing to understand sexism and male privilege, and open to the influence of his female co-facilitator? Supervisors need to see if the male co-facilitator has those qualities. Typically when that isn’t present, they have a sense of privilege or entitlement, they know what they know, and that’s the way it is. This is also a tell that male applicants to be facilitators are not ready and have not done their own work if they do not have those qualities.

Along those lines, it can be more challenging when there is a significant experiential gap with the male half of the pair the more seasoned one. The natural dynamic would be the female trainee being more deferential and her more limited experience more evident. However, this can reinforce traditional male conceptualizations of the female as inferior and needing to be silent and deferential. The way to address this dynamic might include the male co-facilitator more actively supporting his co (but in a non-paternalistic way) and making sure there is space for her. All of this is much less of an issue when the more seasoned and active facilitator is the female.

In order to do equal facilitation, you do not have to participate equally. The person who participates less can carry as much respect as the person who is more talkative if the less talkative one has insightful things to say and important things to say. In some ways the quieter person gets more attention when they speak. Also the group picks up more quickly on someone who's quiet and present than someone who's quiet and not. So the way a co-facilitator participates carries weight. Someone had a quiet volunteer in group but her experience was with the survivor side of things, working with other women, and she was very strong. When she spoke she had a lot of presence, which was there even when silent and was very strong. She had a way of working where she more often spoke when she was invited (by the male co-facilitator or by one of the men in the group) but also when she felt like it she would enter and that showed how present she was to the group.

Co-facilitation expands the vision of what is going on in group. There are times when one facilitator notices something that the other doesn't. For example, scanning the group for body language, side-talk, and all that. It is not clear how much of it is the male/female or just synergy when you find someone who's just really good, regardless of the gender. Female/female co-facilitation can be the same experience. Regardless of gender, having a second set of eyes, using different phrases, and a variety of things show how a second person in the room can be very helpful when they are skilled.

The opportunity to debrief in particular can be helpful, to talk about the group, hit the highlights, hear the other's perspective, and this is something that is missed most from not working in pairs. Also you can really appreciate the things they bring that are different (take intervention in a different direction or have a different take) that on his own he would not have gotten to. There are things that would be lost if the co-facilitator wasn't there.

Co-facilitation makes your job so much harder when it is not a good match, but so much easier when you have a good one.

Another aspect of being a single facilitator and being female is that there's the confidence and poise that they can try to undermine in their partners, their manipulations, control, and resistance. How a female facilitator models dealing with that is a switch for the men in the group, and is part of the meta-message. Age also plays a factor, being old enough to hold authority as someone who could be their mother gives you a whole different dynamic.

Age and gender pieces are very relevant, and both facilitation and co-facilitation is intrinsically more challenging for younger females because of the intersection of ageism and sexism which

poses many challenges. A woman who appears young, regardless of her actual age, have men tending to do more microaggressions, more sense of entitlement, more likely to have a sexual dynamic, and all are definitely challenging. Young women can run groups but have additional issues to have to deal with as a younger than older female.

Another issue that is not gendered is power sharing in co-facilitation. Some good group facilitators do not share power well, including female and male facilitators. How they deal with students is a telling thing, with a surprisingly large number of people that do not share power well of either gender. You can see how they work with students who are willing and able to be true co-facilitators because the students are very uncomfortable sitting in the back seat or the passenger seat, with a surface-level acknowledgement of them but not really working with them. These facilitators can be resistant to feedback and you have to be selective about who you put students with.

There is an instant credibility piece too and gender determines where that comes from. Guys in group automatically look to male co-facilitators, asking them if the female co-facilitator is a “man-hater” and the male co-facilitator has to vouch for her. As a male, you need to redirect your eyes to the female co-facilitator. For the victim/partner survivor experience, the men in the group look to the female co-facilitator for the right answer.

As a program director, having co-facilitators increases fidelity. Income compromising means ongoing supervision of groups is not possible all the time. If co-facilitation is practiced then no one is in an isolated space, so different combinations of facilitators can help keep each other consistent. If they see that something is/is not being done in one or another group, they can keep that more consistent and a supervisor can be less worried about groups being very heterogeneous in terms of how they are facilitated, what is being covered. For example, one agency back in the day had single facilitated groups and limited monitoring/supervision. As a result the single facilitated groups ended up being very different from each other and PO’s would actually refer only to specific clinician’s groups, not to the agency itself. So more opportunities for people to notice inconsistencies via co-facilitation makes it more likely they will be addressed.

Roots of the work of batterer intervention are also relevant. The origins of the work in many cases is anti-oppression work rather than counseling, and when you’re working with the oppressor group you always want to have representatives of the oppressed group present to monitor the quality of the work. So in working with batterer intervention, you don’t want just a female body in the room you want a woman who has some understanding of how she’s been oppressed and can bring that to the table (just as in anti-racism work with White people on their racism, you don’t want an African American co-facilitator to be someone who hasn’t reflected on their own experience, can’t articulate their experience of oppression or miss the dynamic). You want to bring that perspective effectively into the room and to the male co-facilitator and so you need someone confident enough in their own experience to be able to say to a male co-facilitator that he missed something and expect to be listened to.

Another aspect of the professionalization of the work is thinking about something that you need another credential to do and you can ask does the process of obtaining those credentials bring in

the kind of people that you want to bring in in anti-oppression work? Is that the best root to be looking for people in this work? For example, starting working in a mental health center, you find a number of male social workers who came in to do batterer intervention work and whatever had prepared them to get an MSW did not prepare them to do the work they needed to do in batterer intervention. Several were fired for overtly sexist behavior toward their female co-facilitator in groups.

Some of the women who do this work seem to have done victim services work first. This is much less often the case for males. In general, male staff tend to be less knowledgeable about DV and about feminism. In another's experience, women are more likely to have some involvement in issues of social justice than men are. This is not true for everyone, but it is common to see women who have taken women's studies classes, even if not doing DV work, or having other social justice experience, whereas this seems less common among the males doing this work.

Another issue is that more seasoned mental health professionals may actually require more training and supervision than newer clinicians. Typically, someone is quicker to understand the dynamics faster if they are more "new" than if they have been doing mental health work, because traditional conceptualizations of human behavior in psychology, psychiatry, and so on often miss the social justice, macro lens. So it takes longer for them to get them to see these other aspects of the work. They seem to struggle more with confrontation, do a lot more colluding, and use lots of mental health concepts that easily collude, whether they realize it or not. On the other hand, people with great social justice backgrounds do not instinctively know how to facilitate groups well, or confront very easily, for example. You need to have both good interpersonal skills about effective confrontation and joining and good standing with larger issues of social justice, oppression, and microaggressions.

Where is the BIP standards board with this at this point? The standard requirement is still co-facilitation, and people understand there are programs that don't do co-facilitation but they haven't had a blunt, direct conversation about co-facilitation yet. They know there are significant challenges associated with it but the general expectation and aspiration is still gendered co-facilitation.

Also the training requirements are being violated all the time (due to similar challenges like financial demands and time demands) and that has not been explicitly addressed. So many staff, especially newer ones may not have had the required 40 hour BIP training and the 40 hour survivor training. This is a lot to ask of someone who is only being paid to run 1-2 groups a week. Also there is 200 hours of supervision and then continuing education requirements (30 or 40 units over two years). There are lots of expenses associated with the training that are paid for by the trainee or by the agency.

The commitment to continuing education is especially important since that is how the field is learning, changing, learning new skills. There is a huge commitment for someone to want to do work like this.

This is also a job where you learn from your mistakes, so having more experienced and trained people around you is so important at that point. Finding out what happened from someone else who's been there too is necessary because clients are on many levels not a straightforward group of people. There are lots of pitfalls in working with this population, and so it is good to have a structure and mentors who have experience. Co-facilitation encourages that. While it is a financial and staffing struggle, it encourages that mentoring because you probably will have a more and less seasoned person together. This can mitigate lack of skill by having someone with more skill there as well and makes agencies stronger, even though it is a challenging order to fill

Where are continuing education opportunities? Multnomah County has FVCC 1x/month trainings and an annual one they always do too that is all day and excellent. Here at tri-county, although no certificates are given. There are also occasionally local DV trainings as well as larger DV conferences out of state. The most notable one is the IVAT conference in San Diego every year. Allies in Change has done two-day advanced trainings in the past, although they've often been lightly attended.