


Developing a deliberative partnership in sociological evaluation research: A practical reflection on using sociology in the Carer Café evaluation project in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Through a reflection on the Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centre's evaluation of a community Carer Café project between 2022 and 2023, this paper illustrates why and how developing a deliberative partnership in evaluation research is crucial for making a meaningful impact on service development and knowledge transfer. The collaboration was marked by active engagement, mutual learning, continuous dialogue throughout the evaluation process, and the thoughtful exchange of knowledge, all aimed at improving service delivery and promoting ongoing collaboration. The reflection provides a practical account of addressing the practical challenges encountered during the evaluation process and demonstrates how deliberation between researchers and staff members can enrich sociological evaluation research. From the reflection, the article also offers recommendations for conducting clinical sociology research.

Keywords: clinical sociology; carer café; Hong Kong; evaluation research; interdisciplinary collaboration; co-production of social care

1. Introduction

Like other developed countries, informal (family) caregivers in Hong Kong, referred to hereafter as carers, caregivers, and unpaid caregivers, face significant burdens (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Consulting Team 2022). The Hong Kong government acknowledges that women bear a disproportionately larger share of caregiving responsibilities compared to men (The Hong Kong

Legislative Council, 2023). According to government statistics, most caregivers in the community are partners, adult children, or close friends, with women comprising about 60% of caregivers compared to 40% of men (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2021).

The Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres (HKFWC) has always embraced the value of social justice and gender perspective and has been exploring various means of community support for caregivers since the early 2010s. Caregiver support has emerged as one of the organization's key service development themes over the past decade (Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres, 2016). In 2018, HKFWC piloted Carer Cafés in different Integrated Family and Service Centres (IFSCs) of the Social Welfare Department (SWD) Tai Po & North. With the SWD's promotion, inter-organizational collaborations facilitated the initiative's expansion across multiple districts in Hong Kong, providing support to caregivers of different age groups and those caring for individuals with disabilities (Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres, 2018, 2020).

This article reflects on the collaboration in the research experience between the researcher and staff members in developing the evaluation study about the Carer Café initiative of HKFWC from 2022 to 2023. Following the discussion of clinical sociology, it explores the deliberative partnership between researchers and staff members in the co-production and application of knowledge (Rhéaume, 2022b; Schneiderhan & Khan, 2018). This evaluation collaboration followed three key stages: inclusion, dialog, and deliberation stages (Cartland & Ruch-Ross, 2022). This reflection provides a practical account of addressing the power imbalance in the evaluation process and facilitating meaningful deliberation in partnership development (Schneiderhan & Khan, 2018). This article also provides recommendations for developing deliberative partnerships with stakeholders to implement clinical sociology research effectively.

Clinical Sociology Research and Deliberative Partnership

Clinical sociology is a sociological practice defined as “a creative, humanistic, rights-based and interdisciplinary specialization” aimed at improving the life situations of individuals and groups

across various social contexts (Fritz, 2021c). Clinical sociology research aspires to promote social equality through interventions that foster community development and participation (Fritz, 2022; Rhéaume, 2022a). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) serves as a basic research approach in clinical sociology research (Leavy, 2016; Rhéaume, 2022b). The principles of inclusion, dialog, and deliberation are central to engaging stakeholders holistically in the community-based evaluation process (Cartland, Ruch-Ross, & Mason, 2012). According to (Rhéaume, 2022b), the key definitions are as follows:

- Inclusion: The evaluation researcher works to expand the voice of less powerful stakeholders.
- Dialog: The researcher fosters meaningful interactions among stakeholders during the evaluation process.
- Deliberation: The evaluator facilitates the development of consensus throughout the evaluation process and in the final product.

Forming a deliberative partnership throughout the evaluation research process is the core concern in clinical sociology evaluation (Fritz, 2022; Rhéaume, 2022b). The deliberative process aims at “producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers, 2003, p. 309). The output of clinical sociology research seeks to improve social inequities of collective concerns (Goodson & Phillimore 2012), such as the issues of caregiving burdens and the development of informal social support networks, through the solution created by the active participation of community members. Every step in the evaluation process is also designed to empower stakeholders and ensure a meaningful co-production process (Piovesan, 2013), such as shared decision-making, collaborative goal-setting, inclusive feedback sessions, and joint development of evaluation criteria (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012). Stakeholders could achieve it in terms of process, outcomes and autonomy (Howard & Thomas-Hughes 2020).

During research activities, researchers focus on fostering stakeholders' participation by encouraging their contributions and input at every stage of the evaluation (Howard & Thomas-Hughes, 2020). When analyzing research outcomes, clinical sociologists assess how effectively the project meets its objectives and addresses the community's key concerns (Howard & Thomas-Hughes, 2020; Schneiderhan & Khan, 2018). Additionally, they evaluate the extent to which stakeholders gain autonomy and self-empowerment because of their involvement (Howard & Thomas-Hughes, 2020; Piovesan, 2013).

This article illuminates how the researchers and staff members of the Carer Café project achieved a deliberative partnership throughout the evaluation process. The reflection starts with a brief introduction to the Carer Café project, operated by Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres (HKFWC).

The Carer Café Initiative of Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres

The Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres (HKFWC) started the Carer Café initiative in 2018 (Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres, 2018). The emergence of Carer Café arose from the opportunity to create a supportive space for carers by utilizing idle community facilities, such as non-peak hours of activity rooms in social service centers. Unlike conventional funded projects, the development of Carer Cafés by HKFWC primarily relies on using the "idle space" in the community as the physical infrastructure and leveraging volunteers and service users from previous carer support projects as its operational backbone.

In the pilot project, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) generously shared their pantry (used as a café for carers) and an activity room (used for the respite of care recipients) in three Integrated Family and Service Centres (IFSCs) in Tai Po & North once every other week. The trained volunteers played a pivotal role in delivering the Carer Café project by acting as "ambassadors" of engagement and emotional support, preparing beverages and

pastries, and arranging respite for the care recipients accompanying the caregivers.

The Carer Cafés offer several key features: no service charge or registration fee is required, and both scheduled and walk-in attendance are welcome. The service team aims to provide greater flexibility to accommodate the busy and overwhelming caregiving routines of caregivers (Fung, Chan, & Liu, 2022). With the support of the innovative inter-organizational collaboration model promoted by the SWD, nine Carer Cafés have been set up in accessible community venues across different districts in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres, 2023).

2. Research Method

This study used case study methodology to analyze the social dynamics in the Carer Café project (Yin, 2011). The researchers of this study closely collaborated with the staff of HKWFC to set the research question, and plan the research protocol, sampling strategies, and analysis methods. At the outset, the staff members recognized the need to consolidate their practical experience operating the Carer Café project. However, they had not planned to achieve it through a structured evaluation study. The researchers, who specialize in research on social network dynamics and community development, identified a knowledge gap in the Carer Café project regarding its role in supporting caregivers in the community. They sought to explore how the Carer Cafés fostered the development of informal social support networks. This focus emerged after several informal engagements with staff members and visits to the cafés, which helped shape the research proposal.

The researchers refined the research idea into a concrete evaluation proposal in 2021 following on-site observations and discussions with the staff members. The researchers wrote a newspaper article highlighting the key features of the Carer Café initiative to guide staff members on how to find a shared research question to consolidate practical knowledge (Fung & Chan 2021). Based on the discussion with the staff members about the newspaper article, the researchers worked out a proposal aimed at providing

insights into HKFWC's caregiver support service development. In 2022, the researchers secured a small research grant from a Hong Kong private foundation and a matching grant from Saint Francis University, Hong Kong (then SFU), to conduct a one-year evaluation study. During the study, the researchers closely collaborated with Carer Café staff members, exchanging their views on preliminary data with Carer Café colleagues.

To capture the circumstances of the cafés at different stages of the Carer Café project, the researchers consulted senior management staff at HKFWC and selected five cafés across various districts of Hong Kong, primarily frequented by carers of older adults. These cafés included Sheung Shui (North District, commenced in 2018), Tai Wo (Tai Po District, commenced in 2019), Tai Po (Tai Po District, commenced in 2019), Fanling (North District, commenced in 2021), and Wah Fu (Aberdeen District, commenced in 2021). To gain insight into the operations and interactions within the Carer Café project, the researcher (the first author) conducted sixteen hours of participatory observation at these five cafés.

To collect qualitative data on social network dynamics, the researchers (the first and second authors) conducted interviews with twenty-four informants, including staff members, volunteers, and users. Formal consent was obtained from all participants following ethical approval. Beyond the interviews, the researchers and core staff members interacted extensively over social media, with a total of approximately 200 hours of engagement between 2021 and 2022. These online discussions covered a wide range of topics, including sharing practice experiences, discussing relevant theories and concepts, personal reflection, and various research and service initiatives.

Given the informal and evolving nature of these discussions, we recognized the ethical challenges posed by role blurring and participant autonomy. To uphold confidentiality, participant agency, and shared decision-making, we adopted a collaborative approach to consent. Before incorporating any conversation excerpts into our analysis, we sought explicit permission from the relevant staff members. Additionally, we circulated manuscript drafts to staff

members before submission, allowing them to review how their insights were represented and request modifications if necessary.

Power dynamics were also a key consideration. Given the researchers' dual role as both analysts and close collaborators, we engaged in deliberative discussions about how to present social media conversations in a way that preserved participants' voices while maintaining academic integrity. In several instances, excerpts were removed or reworded following discussions with individual participants, reflecting our commitment to ethical co-production and ensuring that staff members retained control over their contributions.

3. Findings

This section highlights how this research project followed the three stages of clinical sociology evaluation: inclusion, dialog, and deliberation (Cartland & Ruch-Ross, 2022). In the inclusion stage, the researchers actively adopted the language of social service to effectively illustrate sociological concepts. This approach helped staff members feel more comfortable taking a more active role in driving the study.

During the dialog stage, the researchers and staff collaboratively conceptualized the Carer Café project experience. This collaborative effort fostered meaningful discussions on identifying the most suitable conceptualization of the project from a social network perspective.

In the deliberation stage, the researchers and staff members reached consensus on the conceptualization and practical application of the evaluation findings. As a result, the staff members and the organization gained a deeper understanding of the social network perspective and realized the synergy brought about by social researchers' contributions while developing their caregiver support services (see Table 1).

Table 1: Outcomes of staff members' participation in different stages

Stages	Outcomes of the staff members' participation
Inclusion	Actively contributing to the development of research objectives
Dialog	Collaboratively interpreting data to refine its conceptualization
Deliberation	Translating theoretical knowledge into practical application

The Inclusion Stage: Learning to Use the Social Service Language to Explain Sociological Concepts

At the outset of the study, both the researchers and the staff members struggled to establish a deeper connection between social service practice and sociological concepts. Although both parties shared a common research interest and a foundational understanding of the Carer Café project, their conversations often stalled when the researchers introduced sociological theories and concepts. For instance, staff members found it challenging to articulate how their frontline experience of engaging caregivers in communities contributed to building the preconditions for social network dynamics and social capital mobilization (Lin, 1999). A managerial staff member said to the researchers in a conversation:

“We [staff members] only know how to deliver social services. When it comes to theory and concepts, I find it overwhelming and difficult to grasp. I rely on you [the researchers] and trust that you both can help us [the staff members] make sense of the findings.”

This dynamic revealed an emerging exclusion from participation in the study, shaped by the perceived roles of academics (i.e., they called the researchers “scholars” [學者, hok⁶ ze²], who are the smartest people working at university and holding knowledge and wisdom) versus frontline staff members. In the staff members' understanding, academics were expected to focus on analysis, conceptualization, and theorization, while staff members were expected to facilitate data collection and wait for insights to emerge from the findings.

The researchers recognized that this division of roles could pose a significant barrier to the evaluation project. Without integrating both perspectives, the findings were prone to lacking a holistic understanding and practical insights that could meaningfully inform caregiver support services.

To address this challenge, the researchers sought to learn the social service language, such as community engagement, out-reaching, and gathering place, to articulate the social service experience with the sociological concepts actively. In a subsequent conversation, the researchers introduced the concept of “informal social support network,” inspired by the discussion of “informal social network” (Small, 2009). This was prompted by the researchers often hearing staff members refer to “building up the nets in communities.” The staff members also highlighted the importance of community networks outside social services in fostering community resilience. As the conversation progressed, the researchers wrote a newspaper article (Fung & Chan, 2021) that illustrated how the concept of “informal social support networks” could capture the frontline experience of the Carer Café project.

After reading the article, the staff members began to feel more comfortable and confident in exploring the conceptualization of the project from a social network perspective. The same managerial staff members responded after reading the article:

“I love the term ‘informal social support network.’ I never imagined there was a term that could capture the subtle community work I do for caregivers. I particularly love the ‘informal’ because it describes the nature of the ‘network’ outside the formal social service model.”

Afterwards, the researchers continued to encourage the staff members to ask questions about the “informal social support network” whenever they encountered difficulties, using a social media group. The researchers also gained valuable insights from the staff members’ frontline experiences through this platform. For instance, one staff member shared the process of inventing the Carer Café project, starting from a mission to reduce the caregiver’s

suffering, and discussed the strategic engagement of various NGOs in the community to help develop the project:

“When I first started with the concept of the Carer Café, no one in the market was willing to accept it. You know my previous work was with single-parent services, right? That’s how I really got a sense of where the pressures on carers come from. So, in this area, when I wanted to start the Carer Café, I had to make sure people [other NGOs] in the area knew I was here. Otherwise, people wouldn’t even notice you. So, I took part in every event in the community. It was about making sure different people knew, especially letting the Social Welfare Department know I was around. Only then could I start promoting the Carer Café concept. In the end, I was lucky. The colleagues at the Social Welfare Department were very supportive and encouraged me to try out the Carer Café plan step by step.”

The researchers then began to ask more detailed questions about the experience, such as exploring the value of the project, identifying the gaps in caregiver support within communities, and understanding how the staff member engaged with the Social Welfare Department. During these discussions, the researchers introduced the concept of brokerage by asking, “Do you think this could be considered a form of brokerage?”. They applied structural hole theory to explain the experience. The researchers also elaborated on the theoretical process of brokerage behaviors, which allowed the staff member to assess whether it made sense immediately. Through these conversations, the staff member gained insight into how sociological concepts could help make sense of social service practices.

This initial experience at the beginning of the study revealed that inclusion is essential for shaping the research collaboration relationship. This relationship set the foundation for subsequent theoretical discussions on how to conceptualize and address community needs (demand) and understand the impact of the resources and interventions available to meet those needs (supply), within the context of the Carer Café project (Rhéaume, 2022a). More importantly, the inclusion experience helped the staff members recognize their active role in the research collaboration, which could

profoundly impact caregiver support services. When setting up the research objectives, the researchers and staff members shared that the study could incorporate the practical implications of the findings.

The Dialogic Stage: An Iterative Dialog between Concepts and Practices in Refining the Conceptualization

As mutual understanding and rapport developed, the roles of the researchers and staff members became more interactive. The researchers took the lead in introducing potential concepts and theories while listening to the practical experiences shared by the staff members. In turn, the staff members became more motivated and confident in evaluating whether the conceptualization made sense. Everyone involved in the conversations, whether in the social media group or meetings, became more engaged in bridging disciplinary boundaries.

The established mutual learning relationship became significantly useful when the data was brought into the analysis. The dialogic interaction between researchers and the staff members built trust and reciprocity (Lin, 1999). This results in new insights into the Carer Café project among the researchers and the staff members because they can collaboratively push the boundaries of interdisciplinary knowledge. There is an example of how the dialogic relationship enhanced the quality of analysis.

In the primary analysis, the researchers were struggling with the responses from the users. When the researchers asked, “What is your experience of visiting Carer Café?”, the users often said, “I felt happy with the café”, “I felt happy with the café”, “I felt comfortable being here”, “It would be perfect if HKFWC organizes the café every week.” The researcher had no clue how to interpret these short answers. When the researchers and staff members discussed this issue, a staff member, who is the project leader, mentioned that:

“It’s quite normal in the project, because we [the service team] were very focused on the caregivers’ feelings and satisfaction. The participants shared these as outcomes of the service during conversations. Sometimes, I forgot my role as a social worker in creating a caregiver-friendly

environment. I also felt that placing too much emphasis on the social worker's role or merit in the intervention might not align with the professional ethos of social work..."

The social worker admitted that this perspective made her face a bottleneck about expanding this observation to an exhaustive structural analysis.

"I could only see how to deliver the service at the time... but when I heard about the social network perspective and brokerage behaviors, I began to appreciate the effort I put into the project preparation. The skills involved are worth consolidating and sharing."

The researchers shared her insights and suggested possible data analysis strategies to incorporate her practical insights regarding the conceptualization and theorization of brokerage behaviors, as well as her role in the project. To gain a deeper understanding of the processes and mechanisms behind the brokerage behaviors observed in the Carer Café project, the researchers invited the social worker to participate in four rounds of reflective writing exercises (Redmond, 2017). The reflective writing exercises centred on questions such as "How did the idea for the Carer Café project originate?", "What was your role in the process?", and "Do you have any personal stories related to the project?". The social worker responded with both written reflection and audio recordings. After reviewing each reflection, the researchers provided feedback and posed new questions for subsequent rounds. They also shared their conceptual and theoretical interpretations of the experience in their feedback. As a result, the researchers and staff members refined the findings into several key concepts—such as spatial context, organizational embeddedness, and brokerage behaviors—to explain the social dynamics within the Carer Café project.

The Deliberative Stage: Building a Collaborative Partnership for Practical Recommendations

One of the objectives of this study, which emerged during discussions, is to offer practical recommendations for the social service sectors in

Hong Kong and other countries that want to implement Carer Café in their communities. Throughout the study, researchers realized that staff members were eager to share their practice wisdom with the social service sector in Hong Kong. A managerial-level staff member stated, “We hope Carer Café can open everywhere and be led by different NGOs!” The project leader also addressed the issue of intellectual property in an interview:

“I never really considered the issue of intellectual property! It’s pointless to bring it up. I’d rather other NGOs learn from us and try it out at their own service locations. You know, Carer Café isn’t mine—it’s for everyone. My goal is to improve the situation for caregivers in our communities. Honestly, we often ‘borrow’ ideas from each other!”

Therefore, the researchers suggested developing practical recommendations to explain how to run Carer Cafés in communities and identify the key elements that facilitate social impact. Going through detailed deliberation on the café’s operationalization, the researchers and staff members collaboratively created the preliminary version of practical recommendations, which were published in the first article on the Carer Café project’s “informalisation of professional social work intervention” in the *Hong Kong Journal of Social Work* (Fung et al., 2022). Subsequently, the researchers and staff members elaborated on the preliminary recommendations in a follow-up manuscript but could not manage to get it published (see Table 2).

This collaboration has had significant impacts on various fields. Firstly, the study has strengthened the concept of the informal social support network and the process of informalization. Beyond the Carer Café project at HKFWC, staff have applied these concepts to other initiatives, such as the informal caregivers’ online time bank. Additionally, these ideas have been disseminated to other NGOs, whose colleagues have shared their insights and perspectives on informal social support networks with the first author after engaging with publications from this project.

Secondly, HKFWC recognized the need for expert contributions to leverage the insights and findings in future service development

fully. As a result, they formally invited one of the researchers (i.e., the first author) to join their service development sub-committee, a formal governance structure of the HKFWC. This collaboration also led to another evaluation study examining data from the caregiver hotline service project, with the aim of identifying key burdens faced by caregivers using generative AI and mapping the spatial patterns of their routines.

Moreover, this research has successfully influenced educational practices. The informal social support network and informalization concepts have been incorporated into a third-year undergraduate course titled “Social Network Analysis for Social Care” at a university. In November 2024, a former staff member from the Carer Café was invited to share real-world experiences of network building with students, sparking considerable interest. As a result, students were motivated to participate in a project aimed at fostering an informal social support network for isolated elderly individuals by regularly playing mahjong with them.

4. Discussion

This collaboration experience illustrates how to cultivate a deliberative partnership in the Carer Café project. From this experience, we have developed practical recommendations for successfully implementing a deliberative partnership in an evaluation study in the context of clinical sociology research. This section also discusses the challenges in developing this partnership.

Building Trustful Relationships

Establishing a trustful relationship is always crucial in clinical sociology research (Fritz, 2021b). Before formally engaging in evaluation research, on-site visits, observations, discussions on informal social networks, and the publication of a newspaper article helped establish mutual trust and a working relationship. During the engagement, the researchers and the managerial-level staff members transparently discussed the expected outcomes of the evaluation research. The researchers aimed to enrich the discussion of social

Table 2: The practical recommendations for running Carer Café, developed after detailed deliberation between the researchers and staff members.

The Structural Conditioning	Socio-cultural interaction	Structural transformation
<p>Physical Environment: Creating convenient hubs for caregivers in the community: the establishment of Carer Cafés originated from the desire to connect with caregivers who often remain hidden within the community through effective means. Informal grassroots support design: The café is accessible to neighbours, offering a relaxed, informal environment without complex procedures.</p>	<p>The social norms in the Café from the gender perspective: Maintaining the service goal in the café design: Addressing caregivers’ needs in the “physical, mental, social, and spiritual” aspects is the core focus of the café’s design. Importance of Coffee and Food: Providing high-quality beverages and food makes the caregivers experience they are being cared for and respected. Raising gender awareness about caring work: providing space and opportunities for the participants (i.e., male or female caregivers) to reflect the challenges of caregivers at the intersectionality of gender, family, and different identities.</p>	<p>The practitioners’ reflection: How to put social work ethos into service development: With the outcomes of the Carer café initiative, the practitioners need to think about how to align their social work ethos into service, which emphasizes gender perspective, support, participation, and advocacy.</p>

<p>The Structural Conditioning</p> <p>Cultural awareness: Gender-based intervention: the service providers have incorporated gender perspectives from the planning stage, addressing issues such as temporarily relieving caregiving responsibilities and examining the division of caregiving duties.</p>	<p>Socio-cultural interaction</p> <p>The Café's layout design: Fostering an inclusive atmosphere: The café relies on participant-driven interactions and activities, allowing them to determine their engagement freely. User-centric space utilization: Each café, though temporary, caters to caregivers' needs through warm décor, simplified processes, and comfort-focused design.</p>	<p>Structural transformation</p> <p>The informal social support network: The realization of the network structure: The practitioners need to be sensitive to realize the presence of network structure, such as the participants' social connections after the café the increasing participation of other services and groups. Developing an informal social support network: The practitioners consider developing the participants' strengths to enhance mutual support, such as continuous training and learning opportunities.</p>
<p>Social connections: Inter-organizational network embeddedness: Cooperation among organizations in determining location, layout, food preparation, promotion, conveying the café's concept, and fostering community support is pivotal. The embeddedness of project staff and volunteer network refers to the collaboration of café managers (program coordinators) and staff (volunteers), pooling resources and experiences for a social support network.</p>	<p>Volunteer force: Developing the caregivers to the café volunteers: program coordinators help caregivers become café volunteers. In this process, volunteers develop "mutual aid" and "altruism" values and turn caregiving experiences into work skills and long-term career plans. Training up the various teams of café ambassadors: coordinators led emotional wellness, coffee, pastries, and childcare ambassadors to develop their potential and create a caregiver-centric community environment.</p>	<p>Further development of volunteer force: Professionalization of volunteer training: The practitioners may think of providing systematic professional training for volunteers in social service or the labor market based on their experience of caring for caregivers.</p>

network perspectives in a social service setting. At the same time, the organization wanted to consolidate their practice experience to make a broader social impact in the social service sector.

This communication allowed both parties to understand the roles and boundaries of the partnership clearly. Both parties also felt that the relationship was safe and supportive, enabling them to express themselves freely throughout the evaluation. Some insights even emerged from small talks on seemingly “irrelevant” topics with different staff members, such as their imagination of the future caregiver’s support service, the struggles of social work ethos and how to present the role of social worker without dominating the impact.

Challenges

The researchers need to understand the landscape of social service in the context of informal engagement events (Fritz, 2021b). Building a trustful relationship requires researchers who do not have related exposures to spend more time grasping the key concerns and expectations of the service. It is essential that the organization believe the theories and concepts are helpful for improving their situation.

Mutual Learning

Mutual learning is a necessary stage in partnership development (Yzaguirre, 2021). This does not mean that the researchers and the staff members need to read through the technical handbooks or courses before collaborating. Rather, the researchers and the staff members should keep an open mind to understand another party’s strengths, weaknesses, and perspectives. For example, the researchers and the staff members often learned from each other through iterative discussions between sociological concepts and social service practice. Both parties carefully listened and gave constructive feedback to each other in the communication. This mutual learning process removed the barriers to knowledge co-creation and co-ownership throughout the study.

Challenges

Researchers and staff members must create mutually beneficial learning objectives and environments (Yzaguirre, 2021), which require additional time and effort. Without a structured curriculum, both parties need to cultivate strong learning motivation and commitment before the mutual learning. The mutual learning process also faces the challenge of different pacing among stakeholders.

Aligning the Vision

Both parties are passionate about the challenges carers face and are committed to developing practical, carer-centric solutions. This partnership became sustainable because of a shared vision of integrating sociological concepts with social service practice for sector development (Rhéaume, 2021). Both parties could easily visualize the social impact of the partnership (Yzaguirre, 2021). Most importantly, they demonstrated commitment to this vision throughout the evaluation research process.

Challenges

As the researchers play a pivotal role in engaging the staff members in the evaluation project, they also require having a strong passion and clear vision for social service (de Gaulejac, 2021). The researchers need to have a deep understanding of the research matter and the sociological concepts. The researchers also need to recognize that service interventions are worth researching as a social phenomenon that addresses social inequities. In this study, there was a discussion about whether it is worth studying the “informal social support network”, which is considered an “artificial” and “unnatural” social relationship. Ultimately, the researchers acknowledged that understanding how the intervention fosters its impact is a crucial aspect of addressing the social inequities caregivers face.

Effective Communication Platform

Communication was the key facilitator in this collaboration. This evaluation research involved over 200 hours of communication on a

social media application, with a significant portion dedicated to small talk (e.g., in a large chat room or individual chats). Both researchers and staff members freely raised concerns as they encountered them. We engaged in continuous follow-up, clarification, explanation, and reflection throughout the evaluation research. This communication also strengthened the partnership by facilitating the exchange of information and ideas (Fritz, 2021a). The staff members genuinely felt that the researchers were accompanying them throughout the study.

Challenges

As the researchers play an active role in this communicative relationship (Jones & Wells, 2007), they must spend much more time maintaining the interaction with the staff members. Sometimes, these interactions occur outside office hours because that is when the staff members have space to talk and reflect. The researchers may need to get used to responding to messages in the morning while the staff members had left messages before they slept. It also requires the researchers to have high flexibility in using different forms of communication (e.g., writing messages, recording audio, or even drawing diagrams) to facilitate the communication. In fact, the communication between the researcher and the staff members is like a friendship ultimately (Boeri, 2021).

Participatory Decision Making

Over the course of the study, the researchers tried to share decision-making power with the staff members, although the staff felt they were not in the position to do so (Fritz, 2021a). Based on the findings, the evaluation addressed sampling strategy, funding, organizational support, dissemination plan, and service development. All these issues were thoroughly discussed in the social media application communication. Both parties clearly understood the rationales behind the decisions and provided timely support to make and implement them. The staff members gradually began to feel that they could influence the study through their inputs (Fritz, 2021a).

Challenges

Sharing decision-making often blurs the boundaries of stakeholders in collaborative research (Cornwall, 2008). The researchers and staff members to have a shared understanding of the balance between participation, academic autonomy, and organizational governance concerns. For instance, although both parties often communicated casually, we established clear ground rules to distinguish between personal conversations and research discussions.

Organizational Support

Organizational support is one of the important factors in encouraging the culture of participatory research (Scher, Scott-Barrett, Hickman, & Chrisinger, 2023). The researchers successfully secured backing from Saint Francis University, the HKFWC, and a private funder to support this research project. Beyond financial support, this study also garnered commitments from different parties, including research resources, logistics, and the dissemination plan. This collaborative effort not only supported the current research initiative but also laid the foundation for future evaluation projects.

Challenges

Researchers and staff members need to persuade the managerial level of the organization to initiate discussions about investing in institutional support. They had to demonstrate the usefulness of the social network perspective in service development, the framework of analysis, and the commitment of frontline staff during preparing the proposal. To achieve that, the researchers need to have a strong ability and knowledge base to demonstrate how sociological concepts can transform the service to achieve innovation or secure potential grants.

Power Dynamics between Researchers and Staff Members

The power imbalance is an inevitable issue in partnership development (Fritz, 2021a). At the beginning of this evaluation research, a fundamental power imbalance existed between the researchers and

staff members due to perceived differences in knowledge levels. The staff often found sociological concepts complicated, making them feel they could not manage them. As a result, they preferred to leave the conceptualization and interpretation of findings to the researchers. Researchers employed teaching skills to reduce this perception during communication to address this. For example, they used service experience to explain concepts in lay language, such as the warm decoration in cafés being a spatial context of social network development. This process of translating abstract concepts into frontline routines helped bridge the perceived knowledge gap between the researchers and staff members.

Challenges

The researchers must be sensitive to the power dynamics embedded in the knowledge gap (Rhéaume, 2022b). Strong facilitation, teaching, and coaching skills are essential to balance this power by bridging the knowledge gap between researchers and staff members. They must also create successful learning experiences for the staff to boost their confidence in engaging with theoretical exploration. In addition, we established clear ground rules which emphasized mutual benefit, deliberative, transparency, and non-coercion.

We also implemented practical strategies to reduce power imbalances. For instance, instead of researchers unilaterally defining the theoretical framework, we engaged staff members in co-developing key concepts by linking the concepts of social network analysis to their experience. We also encouraged staff members to critically refine and reshape our interpretations, ensuring that the analysis reflected a collective understanding and contextually grounded from their experience. One key example of this process was the development of practical recommendations for implementing Carer Cafés. Staff members reviewed and refined these recommendations multiple times after the initial version, drawing from their frontline experience to ensure feasibility and relevance. Additionally, the researchers engaged in personal reflection on the co-produced knowledge and the collaboration process, explicitly acknowledging the staff members' contributions

and the mutual transformation that emerged from the partnership. These approaches not only enhanced staff members' confidence in theoretical engagement but also ensured that knowledge production was truly collaborative rather than extractive.

Conclusion

This article reflected on the experience of developing the partnership between researchers and staff members in the Carer Café project in Hong Kong, focusing on the stages of inclusion, dialog, and deliberation. It demonstrated that these stages are dynamic, and the transition from one stage to another does not follow a step-by-step “cookbook” approach (Harding & Gantley, 1998). Each leap in stage depends on the evolving social relationship between the involved parties. This article discussed how staff participation can foster transformation in the analysis and use of findings. Upon reflection, we noticed that clinical sociology research does not have standardized processes and techniques (Giroux, 1985; Montgomery, Xenocostas, & Jimenez, 2022). Rather, it requires flexibility regarding specific social conditions during collaboration. We hope the insights from the Carer Café evaluation project contribute to the practical application of clinical sociology research and enrich ongoing discussions on its praxis (Chtouris & Miller, 2024; Montgomery et al., 2022).

Although this study is based on the Carer Café project in Hong Kong, its findings may have broader implications for caregiver support initiatives in other cultural and policy contexts. The Carer Café project in Hong Kong was led by social workers and social care organizations, unlike similar initiatives in other countries, which are often led by community members, volunteers, or private individuals (Hou & Kuo; Maggio et al., 2023; Oishi, Son, & Hotta, 2022; Teahan, Fitzgerald, & O'Shea, 2020). However, the informal social support network approach may be particularly valuable in settings where formal caregiving services are limited. In such contexts, stakeholders could explore community-based, reciprocal support models that leverage existing social relationships to person-centered and community-driven support.

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