

## Beyond the sandstone: research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities

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### Introduction

Working collaboratively, whether in the form of coalitions, partnerships or networks, has become one of the 'most defining approaches' to solving social problems over the ten years (Chavis, 2001, p. 309). New forms of working, such as partnerships, have been demanded by the complexity and interrelatedness of individual, community and environmental problems (Bright, 2001, p. 1). Furthermore, a willingness to work collaboratively has become the 'essential requirement' for funding support from both governments and philanthropic organisations (Chavis, 2001, p. 309).

Research collaborations or partnerships between universities and the community welfare sector in Australia are relatively new. Whilst historically ad hoc partnerships have occurred, more recently a significant research capacity and interest in the community welfare sector has emerged. Local, state and national community welfare organisations are now investing substantial resources into their research capacities. This emerging capacity creates opportunities for increased collaboration with academia. Although only in its infancy in Australia the research relationship between the community welfare sector and universities is proving to be more challenging than many would have hoped or expected. Many of these challenges are similar to those identified in literature relating to service delivery collaboration (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004). Collaboration can be impaired by conflict at a number of levels, including inter-agency, intra-agency, inter-professional, inter-personal and intra-personal (Scott, 2005, p. 134). This paper explores how these levels of potential conflict

impact on research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities. Despite these challenges, this paper argues for the value of research collaboration between the community welfare sector and universities as well as making some suggestions about building productive research relationships.

## Background

The focus on collaboration and partnerships in policy and program development over the last decade has been mirrored by an expanding research interest. This paper draws on the lessons from a number of distinct research projects undertaken over the past decade that have enabled consideration of this whole notion of collaboration and partnership. In 1996 the NSW State Government announced it would seek a 'compact' or partnership with the non-government sector. Western Sydney Community Forum became a key contributor and critic of this process, resulting in an action-oriented research study (Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004; Rawsthorne, 2005a). In 2003, the Federal Government was also considering its relationship with the non-government sector, resulting in research on potential partnerships models (Rawsthorne & Shaver, 2008). At the same time it was also concerned about the ability of the service system to respond to the needs of young people with complex needs, resulting in a review of successful international collaborative policy and programs (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004). The insights provided by these various studies inform a critical perspective on community welfare sector and academic partnerships. This learning has also shaped the understandings and strategies used in building productive research partnerships discussed below.

### *Why collaborate?*

There are a number of potential benefits from research collaboration between the community welfare sector and universities. Some of these are immediate and practical whilst others are long term with the potential to change fundamental relations.

Through community welfare sector collaboration, academics are able to stay abreast with current developments in the field and to gauge what is important in terms of research. The community welfare sector is very dynamic and constantly changing, rendering it difficult to keep up-to-date

about developments. Community welfare sector partners provide academics with up to date information and insights. They also provide access to networks and assist in identifying the key people to include in research projects. At a more pragmatic level, community welfare sector organisations can provide access to client data or other service based information as well as research ‘sites’. One positive aspect of increased government performance monitoring and reporting is the extensive information organisations collect and hold on community issues. Community welfare sector partners also make an important contribution to teaching and learning in universities. They provide perspectives from practice, particularly teasing out the complexities of theory/practice nexus. Community welfare sector workers can provide a sounding board for research projects – what is the best way to contact a specific population group? Importantly, practitioners ‘ground’ the research efforts of academics interested in contributing to social change.

Conversely, academic partners have knowledge and resources that may be of benefit to community welfare sector organisations. This includes access to information about new writing, conferences and debates that occur within university settings that the community welfare sector would not normally have access to. Academics also provide access to literature, particularly through access to electronic journals. Up-to-date Australian and international literature can be quickly and inexpensively identified. Through their own research projects and access to larger databases, academics are able to provide access to data. The growing number of large longitudinal Australian studies can provide important information for the community welfare sector. One statistic used regularly by some community welfare organisations is that four out of five Australians support a woman’s right to choose whether she continues with a pregnancy or not, which comes from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Wilson, Gibson, Meagher, Denmark, & Western, 2006). More obviously, another useful skill academics offer concerns program evaluation. The increasing importance of ‘evidenced-based practice’ has placed greater demands on this element of community welfare sector work. In some cases however workers and agencies do not have the training or resources to design research projects that will build this ‘evidence’. Academics can provide advice on research questions, data collection and occasionally analysis.

### *Describing research partnerships*

Whilst community welfare sector and academic partnerships are relatively new in Australia there is a longer tradition in both North America and the United Kingdom. Within the literature there are a range of frameworks, however one particularly useful approach to categorising collaborative research activities has been developed by Barker and colleagues (1999, p. 87). Writing of their experience in academic/practice/community research partnerships in North America, they developed a typology to describe three types of research being undertaken in universities, which would seem relevant to the Australian context as well.

Table 1. Typology of community welfare sector and university research partnerships

	<b>Model of interaction</b>	<b>Roles and relationships</b>
Type 1	Current proactive practice of academically driven research	Initiatives with a sole academic inquirer
Type 2	A more reactive practice for designing research in response to the needs and input of community agencies.	Community members have limited involvement but academics still define the methods of inquiry
Type 3	All aspects of the research practice are interactive	Academic researchers and the community are equal partners

(Adapted from Barker et al., 1999, p. 87)

Another useful broad distinction is made by the Canadian Centre for Research on Violence against Women and Children (cited in Clément et al., 1996) between:

1. A collaboration which involves cooperation between partners during one or more stages of the research (such as data collection or report writing)
2. A partnership which, alternatively, involves cooperation at every stage of research.

These descriptions are not categorical, with individual academic undertaking all three types of research at any one time. Within the Australian contexts these different types are supported by different funding streams, with Type 1 closely aligned to Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grants, Type 2 supported by commissioned or contracted research and Type 3 supported by ARC Industry Linkage Grants. In the context of discussing research partnerships, it is interesting to note that collaborative grants have a higher success rate. Success rates for ARC Linkage Applications, for example, in 2007 (Round 1) were 42.9% compared to 20.4% for Discovery Projects. In the full year of 2006, Discovery Project applications outnumbered Linkage applications by nearly 4:1 (Australian Research Council, 2006, pp. 4–14). This data suggests that there are good opportunities to fund substantial, useful, research between universities and the community welfare sector.

## Challenges to Research Partnerships

Scott (2005, pp. 132–34), in discussing service delivery collaboration in child protection, proposes a conceptual framework for analysing inter-agency collaboration. The framework identifies five levels at which conflict may impede collaboration: inter-organisational, intra-organisational, inter-professional, inter-personal and intra-personal. The framework seeks to provide practitioners with a tool to analyse the factors impeding collaboration and develop interventions that enable the fostering of productive partnerships. Whilst developed from practice-based experiences, the framework, by providing fresh insights into what appears to be intractable conflicts between agencies, may be useful in understanding the barriers to research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities. Importantly, it also provides some possible interventions that mitigate against these conflicts.

### *Inter-organisational conflict*

Inter-organisational work is one of the most difficult forms of social organising (Chavis, 2001, p. 309–311). Structural differences between organisations, particularly in relation to power and resources, can be the source of conflict. In service delivery partnerships, the issue of power, particularly decision-making power, is often identified as a major barrier to effective partnerships (Raw-

sthorne & Eardley, 2004, p. 10; Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004, pp. 16–28). The service delivery partnership literature is replete with references to ‘real’ partnership based on equality and ‘genuineness’. Adams for example (cited in Clements et al., 1996, p. 2) argues partnerships require a group of ‘people working together and maintaining equal personal power’. Likewise, in consultations undertaken about the development of the Working Together for NSW partnership agreement between the State Government and the community welfare sector (Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004, pp. 29–33), many practitioners highlighted the nature of power that underpins partnership relations. Trust, respect, accessible language, ownership, clarity about decision making, genuine participation and transparency were all seen as key elements of successful partnerships (Rawsthorne, 2005b, p. 14).

Whilst laudable, such definitions create oftentimes unrealised expectations. In the research arena, universities are viewed as powerful and well-resourced institutions in stark contrast to many community welfare sector organisations. The challenge of creating ‘equal’ partnership in this context is considerable. Misunderstandings about decision-making power and control over the research process may be prevented if power differences are acknowledged and the adverse impact of these mitigated. It may be useful to consider partnership not as an objective fact but as a subjective process, embedded with power and emotions. Of central importance is the nature of the participation expected. For academics, epistemological and methodological questions may not be negotiable. Academics need to be careful not to describe a relationship as a partnership (Type 3) when they are seeking community input (Type 2) in a study in which methodological questions are already decided.

The community welfare sector and academia are very diverse ‘partners’, which creates both opportunities and challenges to potential research collaboration (Chavis, 2001, p. 309–312). This diversity (in interests, history and power) creates more complexity and conflict than any other form of social organisation (Chavis, 2001, p. 309). Examining one example, *time*, highlights the inter-organisational differences with the potential of creating conflict between the partners.

Australian universities’ calendars are shaped around semesters and teaching requirements, with intensive time for research really only available outside of semesters – usually November to February. It is this period, particularly De-

cember and January, which is 'slower' in the community welfare sector – many people take extended breaks (particularly those in management positions), fewer programs run during school holidays and typically management committees will not meet over this time. This period is not a good time in which to contact key decision makers in organisations or, often, clients.

There is also a difference in concepts of 'immediacy' between the potential partners. Academics work in an environment that has long lead times, where new courses, for example, take three to four years from conception to delivery. Universities are very large institutions with a correspondingly large bureaucracy. Community welfare sector organisations, conversely, often have quite direct access to decision making forums, such as management committees. A new program can move from conception to delivery in a matter of months.

Additionally, funding timeframes also create inter-organisational pressures between the community welfare sector and academia. The shift away from recurrent funding to contracting in the community welfare sector has undermined the development of long-term individual and organisational relationships that seem vital to collaborative work (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004, p. 10–12). Successful partnerships involve long-term commitment to working collaboratively, where organisations and individuals have the opportunity of engagement and debate over time (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004, p. 10–12). The increasing use of short-term non-recurrent funding of the community welfare sector impedes the development of long-term relationships. Partnerships of convenience (formed to secure funding or access to a client group) are unlikely to be sustainable. Furthermore, academic funding processes, such as those of the Australian Research Council, take so long as to be inappropriate for many current issues in the community welfare sector. Additionally, in some circumstances ARC Linkages research teams are very large and geographically diverse, making this dialogue and debate difficult.

### *Intra-organisational conflict*

The effects of new managerialism have been felt in both the community welfare sector and universities. Increasingly, research outputs (peer reviewed publications) are used to measure the value of individual academics. This contributes to an individualistic culture that focuses on the constant production

of sole-authored publications. Collaboration, whilst lauded by some funding processes in academia, is discouraged through work management processes. Acknowledging a partner or partner organisation, whilst ethically appropriate, in many cases reduces the 'points' awarded in work management processes for published work. Unless a partner is able to contribute financially to the research (which is valued by work management processes) working collaboratively can be seen as a distraction.

Conversely, many community welfare sector workers resent the imposition of reporting and data requirements by governments (Rawsthorne & Shaver, 2008, p. 56–58). This resentment compounds a pre-existing reluctance to engage with 'numbers'. In this way research, like processes, are seen as distractions from the 'real' work of working directly with people.

### *Inter-professional conflict*

Professional orientation is influential in enabling collaboration. Professional training privileges particular perspectives and approaches, creating a reluctance or inability to accept alternative perspectives or approaches. Community welfare sector and academic partnerships are vulnerable to inter-professional conflict. Academics trained to be rigorous and to some extent dispassionate can find the personal engagement of community workers 'unprofessional'. Conversely, community workers trained to be people-centred can find academic concerns with theory elitist and wasteful. Working collaboratively often requires staff to work differently from the way they have been trained or have operated in the past. Successful collaboration requires the right conditions as well as some luck but will not succeed without practitioners skilled at collaboration (Riccio, 2001, p. 341–342).

Collaborative skills are not necessarily those traditionally demanded of academics and whilst 'community engagement' is encouraged in many universities, few opportunities are provided to develop the skills necessary. These included partnership-fostering expertise, community involvement skills, change agents proficiencies and strategic and management capacities (Ansari, Phillips, & Zwi, 2002, p. 152). Academics may have skills gaps in effectively reaching target populations, working with community groups, community organising and being change agents (Ansari et al., 2002, p. 154). These skills gaps can lead to poor processes that adversely affect the partnership and lead to inter-professional conflict.

Conversely, academics may feel they have the professional skills and expertise to make methodological decisions. In this way key research decisions are not discussed but remain the domain of the academic. Community welfare workers skill set has not historically focused on or valued numerical skills, potentially making them less confident about challenging academic partners. This may contribute to a breakdown of professional relations.

### *Inter-personal conflict*

Individual relationships are at the core of any successful partnership. These relationships require not only time but also trust to flourish. The diverse histories and power of the partners can create inter-personal conflict. Academics, familiar with a level of community status, cannot assume that a community agency will 'trust' them because they are from a university. In fact, many community sector organisations and their clients have negative experiences with 'researchers'. This is particularly the case with disadvantaged communities such as Indigenous communities. For these concerns to be allayed requires deliberate strategies overtime that earn and built trust. Likewise, a haphazard email to individual academics seeking research collaboration may not generate trust. Efforts need to be made to match the research collaboration with the interests of the academic and to build in mutual benefits.

### *Intra-personal conflict*

Scott (2004, p. 138) suggests intra-personal conflict may emerge from an individual's emotional reactions or when individuals feel anxious, conflicted or defensive. Psychologically, individuals need to feel acknowledged and valued. If publications, for example, do not acknowledge the contribution of all parties (both institutions and individuals), this may create resentment and anxiety. This resentment can linger and hamper future research collaboration. Key people in the partnership can then delay or destroy research projects, through blocking access to data or not allocating the time necessary. Clearly neither academics nor community welfare sector workers are immune from such emotions. In some fields of academia, attending to the emotional aspects of research is quite foreign. Honesty, built on a foundation of trust, may protect research partnerships from such intra-personal conflict.

## Building Productive Research Partnerships

Building productive research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities is in essence about relationships built on trust, respect and sharing power; it is about building the capacities of individuals and organisations as well as bridging social divides. Given this, community development theory and practice can be usefully employed in building productive research partnerships. Through working in partnership one 'is involved in a constant cycle of doing, learning and critical reflection' (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, p. 286). Working collaboratively does not just 'happen', rather it requires conscious commitment, time and resources. Fawcett and colleagues (1995, p. 695) likewise argue that adopting an empowerment approach is likely to improve partnerships.

Drawing on a case study, the following section explores the practice of working collaboratively to identify strategies that may build productive research partnerships. The case study is a research partnership that has evolved over the past five years between a medium-sized non-government organisation (hereafter called 'the Centre') and myself (an early career researcher). The Centre provides direct services in a disadvantaged area of Sydney. It has a long tradition of activism and innovation but, until recently, little research capacity. The case study is an attempt at a Type 3 research partnership, one which involves both academic researchers and the community as equal partners in all phases of the research project (Barker et al., 1999, p. 87).

This research partnership started with a phone call from the Centre's coordinator requesting my research advice and support. Like many non-government organisations the Centre was going through a process of trying to improve its data management and sought advice. I provided some assistance in the design of questionnaires to collect information from clients. At this preliminary stage only small amounts of assistance was sought by the Centre or provided by me, with minimal time implications. This stage, however, did begin to build trust and strengthen the relationship. I then approached the Management Committee of the Centre requesting their participation in a project I was interested in (Type 1 research). This project involved interviews, focus groups and observation. Prior to agreeing to be a 'site' for research, a formal partnership agreement was entered into between the parties, setting out agreements on confidentiality, consent

and authorship. Shortly afterwards, the Centre received funding for a time specific program and asked for my assistance in the development of an evaluation framework. It was this request that shifted the relationship towards a Type 3 (Barker et al., 1999, p. 87) research partnership.

The remainder of this section discusses some of the strategies used to minimise barriers and areas of potential conflict at the five 'levels' Scott (2005) identifies. These strategies were informed broadly by community development principles of addressing social disadvantage through participation and empowerment (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, pp. 262–68). This included a commitment to valuing local knowledge, culture, resources, skills and processes (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, pp. 267–272). My role was one of facilitation rather than an 'expert' enabling 'bottom up' solutions to issues identified by the Centre or local community.

Greater understanding of the *inter-organisational* differences was enabled by my prior work experience in the non-government sector. The organisation was known through previous community work and some management committee members and staff were known on a personal level. This knowledge as well as the reputation of the organisation assisted in the building of trust. A good knowledge of the working lives of each partner assisted in creating a more effective partnership. This was enhanced through ongoing dialogue to clarify the different roles and perspectives of partners. In any relationship, making assumptions about the other partner is attractive but can lead to serious misunderstandings. Whilst working collaboratively is attracting more attention from both the community welfare sector and academics, they remain in many ways 'diverse partner groups who traditionally did not communicate with each other' (Ansari et al., 2002, p. 156). It is possible, however, to find common ground, such as a desire for positive social change.

Another area for potential *inter-organisational* conflict flowing from perceived differences in power was that of resources. Higher education has not, however, been immune from the broader processes affecting resources and funding. Much of the collaborative work in this research partnership was done without any additional funds, through allocating time, providing access to software, through research expertise and a shared enthusiasm for the project. As Riccio (2001, p. 342) notes, the craftsmen of

collaboration often operate without adequate compensation and proper administrative resources and staffing. The issue of resources was revisited on a regular basis: did the collaboration need more funds? If so, how were these to be obtained? The partners acknowledged that a sense of shared responsibility is difficult to achieve in a competitive environment or between partners of unequal status or resources.

Managing *inter-organisational* and *intra-organisational* relationships proved difficult although strategies to ensure transparency and fair access to resources have counteracted this difficulty. One specific strategy has been to enter into a formal partnership agreement. Some writers such as Riccio (1998, p. 342–433) argue that concern about form or structure often delay and stifle collaboration, suggesting instead that ‘form should follow function’. In some circumstances, a lack of details may not be a problem if this trust and goodwill is built up over time and through experience.

The formal agreement was proved valuable in clarifying the rights and responsibilities of both parties. These included the circumstances under which access was provided to data or clients, the right of acknowledgement or joint authorship, approval processes, publication rights/veto and dispute processes. The agreement also endeavoured for some equality in decision-making and outcomes for both parties. From an academic perspective a formalised agreement placed the research partnership within a community engagement framework, enabling this work to be acknowledged.

In a situation in which prior personal relationships between individuals at the Centre and myself were concerned, *intra-organisational* conflict could have flowed from a perception that research resources were only available to some members of the organisation. It was important that the partnership was with the organisations, not specific people or friends, as symbolised through the formal agreement.

This research partnership has benefited from a crossover of skills and experience between the parties, minimising potential *inter-professional* conflict. Some key Centre staff have research skills and experience. This, together with pressures from funding bodies, has meant that the Centre has been interested in building the ‘evidence base’ of its work together with its research capacity. This openness has minimised the potential for *inter-professional* conflict. Ansari and colleagues (2002) in the South African

context found a disjuncture between academics and community practitioners' understandings of each other, particularly in relation to knowledge and skills. Academics were likely to devalue the knowledge and skills of community practitioners. They note that:

... there is a need to embrace lay knowledge and indigenous theory, but to take secular knowledge seriously implies a shift of the ownership and control away from the professional experts. (Ansari et al., 2002, p. 156)

Successful research partnerships rely on partners' 'receptive capacity' and the ability of partners to 'unlearn' old ways of working (Kekäle & Viitalia, 2003, p. 246). This has meant, for example, not assuming methodological expertise but being open to debate and dialogue about the best way forward. It has also meant valuing outcomes that may not be measurable within academic performance management processes.

The research partnership was nurtured by opportunities that expanded the knowledge of the Centre and enabled the sharing of skills, ideas and approaches. This included co-presenting at conferences, attending network meetings and writing for industry newsletters. Whilst research was the primary focus of the partnership, there are other important secondary outcomes. These include enhanced understanding of issues like research design and methodological choices that can be used in other settings, thereby indirectly building the research capacity of the community welfare sector. There would seem to be a need for greater professional development opportunities for academics and community welfare workers to share skills, ideas and approaches.

Professional orientations and skills are an important element of successful partnerships and minimising *inter-professional conflict*. Working collaboratively requires staff to work differently from the way they have been trained or have operated in the past. For many community welfare sector workers, for example, the collection of accurate client data has not traditionally been part of their job roles. However, building an evidence base to support the Centre programs required a different approach and perspective. As mentioned previously, collaborative skills are not necessarily those traditionally demanded of academics. The research partnership demanded greater understanding of diverse cultures, institutions (from

youth refuges to schools) and individuals. Language carries important symbolic meaning and can lead to potential conflict, with few community welfare sector workers viewing the people they work with as 'data', 'respondents' or even 'clients'. Building successful research partnerships required constant awareness and reflection on what was internalised ways of working.

As in all relationships, the partnership has required nurturing to minimise inter-personal conflict. One strategy I used to counter potential *inter-personal conflict* and create greater depth of understanding between the partners was to spend time informally at the Centre. I have attended informal lunches and social outings as well as formal events (unrelated to my role as 'researcher') in an effort to build personal connections with the various people at the Centre. Finding 'down time' is challenging when both community sector practitioners and academics experience time pressures in their work, often created by processes outside their control such as reporting deadlines and workload formulas. However, if we accept that partnership is fundamentally about relationship building within a community development framework, this is not only about time to do but also about time to think, to debate, to learn.

Different communication styles also have the potential to create *inter-personal conflict*. In general, the staff at the Centre preferred face-to-face meetings with an opportunity for dialogue to develop. Community welfare sector practitioners often have an acute understanding of the importance of process in facilitating communication. In this way the style of communication signals the nature of the partnership: are partners informed of decisions made or involved in the decision making process? Community welfare sector workers consulted in relation to Working Together for NSW were adamant they did not want to be involved in 'partnerships' in which they passively received information about decisions (Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004, pp. 16–18). Bearing this in mind we have included a commitment to ongoing evaluation and learning. Drawing on the lessons from the 'partnership veterans' in the United States, the research partnership was informed by incremental, opened ended planning processes that stressed continual learning (Rubin, 2000, p. 228).

The partnership involved individuals and as such was vulnerable to *intra-personal conflict*. One ongoing intra-personal challenge from an academic

perspective was balancing the time commitment to building relationships and academic management demands that affect career development. The process of truly collaborative research can be very time consuming and creates a tension with the university demands to produce. The right to publish free from perceived interference is central to academic researchers. It is important that partnerships relationships are not allowed to soften academic critical perspectives but this needs to be assessed in the context of the overall relationship.

This research partnership with the Centre was motivated by my desire to work differently. As an early career researcher with a long history in the community welfare sector, many opportunities were created through working collaboratively. Their strong criticism of academic engagement with the 'real world' created a desire to approach issues differently and a sense that existing research models were not effective for many issues affecting communities. The partnership was facilitated by an open, creative culture that encouraged risk-taking. Somewhat ironically, the social norm of 'getting along' embedded in many collaborative initiatives can serve to stifle creativity by not allowing members to address conflicts and inequalities (Chavis, 2001, p. 310). In this partnership, risk-taking was encouraged together with time to reflect on what worked well and what did not. Collaboration required the creative use of resources and did not always require new or additional resources. It required looking outside the square to draw on resources not always evident. Flexibility was required of the partners involved – both individuals and organisations (including the management committee).

Like all relationships the partnership continues to change and is not without challenges (to both parties). The developmental foundations of the partnership however remain solid. To date it has involved the joint development of an evaluation framework, with all possible approaches discussed and debated. In this way the 'pure' research questions became grounded in the needs of the organisation. This resulted in a more robust research strategy for the organisation (which has contributed to building evidence concerning the program) as well as an interesting and useful academic study. The study involved triangulated mixed methods, providing the opportunity to develop new technical skills for all involved (through pre- and post-testing). The evaluation has provided strong statistical evi-

dence of clear and important changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviour as a result of completion of the program. The reporting phase of this research has begun, with an accessible report being developed for stakeholders, statistical findings used for lobbying purposes and papers written for academic journals, as well as conference papers. The relationship and trust in the partnership is such that assistance is being provided in other, unrelated, research projects.

In reflecting on this research partnership, its foundations included: allowing time, building knowledge of each other, the ability to use different types of knowledge, shared values or passion, effective and appropriate communication, having partnership-fostering skills and a desire to do things differently. A commitment to community development principles and practices continues to enable this productive research partnership to flourish.

## Conclusion

The increased research capacity and interest within the community welfare sector in Australia opens new potential for the forging of creative partnerships between the sector and universities. Gaining the greatest value from these partnerships holds both opportunities and challenges for the partners. A synergy of efforts between the community welfare sector and universities is likely to generate greater positive outcomes than the two sectors working independently. Historically, Australia has been very poor at investing in research and evaluation in the community welfare sector, particularly in comparison to the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. This lack of investment has severely hamstrung the development of effective properly resourced programs. The more recent investments by both government and community welfare organisations are welcome indeed. There are real opportunities for academics and universities to ‘value-add’ to these investments through research partnerships and other forms of collaboration. For academics, these partnerships provide great opportunities to go ‘beyond the sandstone’ in order to engage with the everyday concerns of the Australian community.

Although academics and the community welfare sector may not be ‘traditional’ partners, they share common values and desires. Both view the understanding of the experience and cause of social disadvantage as fundamental to social change. Whilst conflict has the potential to impede

the development of productive research partnerships, this conflict need not be seen as negative but as an opportunity. If the partners are able to transform this conflict through collaboration, they provide a model for transforming broader community conflict and inequality, creating increased capacity for social change (Chavis, 2001, pp. 309–312).

Community development principles and practices can transform this conflict. An understanding and acknowledgment of the operations of power, at institutional, cultural and personal levels must be the starting point. Attention to how the operations of power shape research will facilitate more productive partnerships. Strong sustainable relationships can be created by ensuring time for dialogue, building trust and supporting the development of partners' capacities. Partnerships founded on a notion of empowerment will not be 'partnerships of convenience' but meaningful collaborative work to provide new knowledge and understandings about social disadvantage in Australia.

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