

Working with Couples: Promise or Peril?

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WhatWorks

TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

A Global Programme To Prevent
Violence Against Women and Girls



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On-going Ethical Debate

- ❖ Traditionally, work with couples experiencing violence has been controversial among advocates and practitioners
- ❖ Multiple experiences and contexts inform debate
 - Couple's counselling
 - Mediation (e.g. custody, divorce, justice system, etc)
 - Survey research and/or qualitative studies
 - Impact evaluation



Traditional concerns

- ▶ Programmatic concerns
 - ▶ May compromise women's safety
 - ▶ Working with couples, ignores power imbalance inherent in a violent relationships
 - ▶ Endorses compromise and reconciliation rather than empowering women to leave
- ▶ Research concerns
 - ▶ Violates WHO ethical guidelines which recommends interviewing only one woman per household and men and women in separate clusters/communities



Increasing interest in engaging couples in low income settings

- ▶ Strong request by some woman for work with their partners
- ▶ Emerging evidence that enhancing couple communication and skills can reduce violence
- ▶ Context of prevention programming in Global South is somewhat different:
 - ▶ Women in many countries truly do have fewer options to leave
 - ▶ Programs to reduce violence while keeping relationship intact acknowledge this reality and women's preferences
 - ▶ Fear however is that they reinforce cultural norms of family preservation at all cost



Parallel interest in couple-based research

- ▶ Can yield many benefits:
 - Corroboration in stories increases “trustworthiness” of data (Andrew and Milly example)
 - Contrasting narratives can reveal differences in meanings and interpretations assigned to events
 - Dual accounts yield more accurate information about exposure to community level activities (*18 of 20 couples gave inaccurate accounts of partners exposure to SASA!*)
 - Can enrich understandings of processes of change



Evaluation research is different than prevalence surveys

- ▶ Today's couple-level research is taking place in contexts different from early survey research
 - ▶ On-going presence of NGO doing programming on violence
 - ▶ Community well aware that violence is a focus of program activities
 - ▶ Can put in place risk minimization strategies
- ▶ But challenges remain for interviewing couples in control communities



Risk minimization strategies

- ❖ Establish “protective” eligibility criteria
 - ❖ Limits on type, severity, or timing of most recent episode of violence (e.g. not in the last year)
- ❖ Actively monitor for “social harms”
 - ❖ Post interview follow up on sub-set of participants



Interview strategies

Separate

Benefits:

Allows each partner to tell story from their own perspective

Increases trustworthiness of data and allows triangulation

Allows one interviewer to conduct both interviews

Concurrent

Benefits:

Same benefits as with separate but also may facilitate consent

May calm fears around information being “transferred” to partner by interviewer

BUT: Introduces variable of interviewer style and skill

Joint

Benefits:

Couple interaction may reveal important insights about couple dynamics

- Dominance
- Communication skills
- Controlling behaviors

Allows co-creation of narrative

BUT: May color narratives or make respondents less forthcoming



Challenges of recruitment

- ▶ Research with couples raises tricky challenges for recruitment and informed consent– how to avoid undue pressure
- ▶ Traditionally, preference has been to recruit men through their female partners.
- ▶ But some projects have found this difficult so shifted to recruiting male partners directly
- ▶ In Rwanda, we provided women with info about program but to be eligible they had to arrive with their partners to be eligible for participating in couples program.



What do you think? What have you tried?



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