

Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health / Nova Scotia Advisory Council
on the Status of Women
A Healthy Balance
A community alliance for health research on
women's unpaid caregiving

The Puzzles of Partnership:
Creating Common Ground so that Research Makes a Difference

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Abstract

The Healthy Balance Research Program embraces a challenging mix of stakeholders and a concomitant diversity in perceptions of what constitutes success. The program brings together researchers, government bodies, community organizations and members of traditionally under-represented groups to explore the relationships among women's health and well-being, family life and earning a livelihood. The intent is to engage in "research that makes a difference" and to see that difference manifested in the policy arena. There are many factors to take into account when devising an evaluation framework in such a dynamic environment. While policy uptake is a long-term outcome, there are important elements of partnership, communication and the creation of common ground among all of the stakeholders that also merit careful and explicit study. This paper will examine the ways in which open and meaningful communication can be both promoted and evaluated, and will address the contribution of effective dialogue towards achieving the program's goal of policies that foster a healthy balance in women's lives.

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Healthy Balance Research Program

The Healthy Balance Research Program (HBRP) is an innovative partnership exploring the relationships between women's paid and unpaid work, including caregiving responsibilities, and women's health and well-being. Of interest are the ways in which caregiving is now organized, and how caregiving affects people's sense of empowerment in their lives.

Two key themes underlying the research are that care is the objective, not the problem, and that caregiving is about relationships, not about tasks.

HBRP has a mandate to do research that makes a difference, interpreted as producing knowledge presented in a variety of formats to speak to different audiences, key among which are policy audiences, where research findings are intended to bring about policy change. Also important are the meaningful inclusion of women often missing in traditional research, development of research capacity, and the creation and nurturing of partnerships.

"Perhaps the central question that should be asked is not so much what works, but rather what did we learn from the work." (Torjman & Levitan-Reid)

"Weiss proposes incremental changes in people's cognitive structures in the hopes that such changes will lead to changes in policy." ((Shadish, Cook, Leviton)

"Evaluation is an elastic word that stretches to cover judgment of many kinds. What all the uses have in common is the notion of judging merit." (Weiss)

"People are often willing to adopt an explanatory account if it is plausible, even if there is inadequate evidence of its accuracy." (Mark, Henry, Julnes)

"... policy results from "couplings" between priority problems and plausible solutions." (Cabatoff)

"The goal is to convey a complex message in a simple way without distortion." (Zajano & Lochtefeld)The Logic Model ...

- linear
- program-centric
- does not necessarily reflect causation
- bottom-line orientation-accountability

Challenges of using the Logic Model for the Healthy Balance Research Program

1. the multitude of partners
2. fitting research into the Logic Model paradigm
 - What are useful performance measures for research?
 - Cyclical nature of Healthy Balance relationships - output for researchers is input for policy makers
3. generic outcome/performance measure challenges
 - control
 - causality
 - pace
4. complexity of the domains in which HBRP is expected to achieve outcomes
 - the policy arena
 - incremental nature of change
 - policy environments
 - policy communities
 - knowledge translation
 - What is knowledge?
 - Who do we need to translate for?
 - performance stories; compelling stories

Creating common ground

- make explicit the expectations
- work on a common language
- have in place a workable conflict resolution mechanism
- consider outcome mapping
- focus on contribution to the achievement of outcomes
- focus on relationships, partnerships, enhanced communication and the benefits that accrue
- create a credible contribution story
- the process is as important as the outcomes

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