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## ABSTRACT

The attitudes of long-term collaborators on research publications about the negotiation of substantive differences of opinion were studied. Long-term collaborators were those who had co-authored publications with another academic for 10 years or more. Multiple sources of data collected from both members of 12 collaborative pairs included interviews and analysis of selected publications and the curriculum vitae of each member of the pair. Participants' responses to how they negotiated substantive differences of opinion with the collaborative partner could be grouped on a continuum defined as "Like Minded," five pairs who thought significant differences of opinion were unlikely, Triangulators, three pairs who thought differences were not likely to be about important issues, and Multipliers, four pairs who thought differences of opinion would be frequent and expected. Sixteen of the 24 downplayed the suggestion that they and the collaborative partner experienced significant differences of opinions. Differences in disciplinary training seemed to offer little by way of insight into how members of long-term collaborative pairs viewed differences of opinion. It is hypothesized that members of the first group deny experiencing significant differences of opinion because they began the relationship thinking alike or grew to do so over time. Members of the second group are so familiar with the others' thinking that they are aware that they see the same question from a slightly different angle, and members of the third group see differences as routine because they know each other well enough to recognize their differences. (SLD)

# COLLABORATORS' ATTITUDES ABOUT DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

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\*Note: A full-length version of this paper is available. The short version was prepared to accommodate the conference format. The full-length paper is available by contacting the author.

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Collaborators' Attitudes about Differences of Opinion

"*There is no knowing without conflict.*" Parker Palmer, 1988

This quote from an article by Parker Palmer called *Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing* (1988) underscores the contribution of multiple perspectives to advancing knowledge. It evokes a very different perspective than our image of innovation and creativity resulting from a spontaneous spark of individual genius. Palmer argued that the exchange of differing perspectives is most likely to contribute to knowledge and learning when it occurs within the context of community where there is a commitment to a common goal and a sense of affiliation among its members. Similarly, in a book called *Creative Collaboration*, Vera John-Steiner (2000) concluded that innovation is most likely to arise from prolonged exchange between collaborators with different viewpoints who are deeply familiar with each other's area of expertise. "Collaboration," John-Steiner observed, "thrives on diversity of perspectives and constructive dialogue between individuals negotiating their differences while creating shared voices and visions" (p. 6). Diverse viewpoints, prolonged and genuine engagement with each other's idea, and deep familiarity and respect with each other's areas of expertise are relational dynamics of collaborative relationships that are associated with innovation.

Conflict is one dimension of relational dynamics that can derail a collaborative relationship. Understanding how collaborators deal with disagreements can help us to identify ways to create a collaborative culture that

embraces difference. It can also add to our understanding of elements of the collaborative process or relational dynamics that can diffuse conflict and contribute to the sustainability of the relationship.

This paper will describe long-term collaborators' attitudes about substantive differences of opinion. Long-term collaborators are those who have co-authored publications with another academic for ten or more years.

### Methods

#### *Data Collection*

Multiple sources of data were collected from both members of twelve collaborative pairs (n=24). Sources of data include a one-on-one, semi-structured interview conducted separately with each member of a collaborative pair, and document analysis of selected publications and the curriculum vita of each member of the pair. Participants were selected in a number of ways. Most participants were respondents to a questionnaire I distributed by mail to a matched sample of senior academics at 22 research universities. More details about the survey methodology are available in the appendices of my 2001 book, *Working Equal: Academic Couples as Collaborators*.

A complete description of the methodology appears in the full-length paper.

This paper reports on findings from a single question in the interview protocol. That is the question about how the participant reported that he or she negotiated substantive differences of opinion with a collaborative partner. Differences of opinion refers to differences in interpretation about substantive issues, not to other kinds of differences such as in personality, working or

writing style, or conflict about organizational or administrative matters. Participants were asked to frame their responses in terms of one specific collaborative partner, rather than to speak about their experiences with collaboration in general.

A number of descriptive characteristics are an important context for understanding the findings. Participants were trained in a diverse range of fields, mostly but not exclusively in the social sciences. The fields include anthropology, communication studies, economics, education, English, history, political science, sociology, special education, and psychology. Seven of the 12 pairs of collaborators earned doctorates in the same discipline. By in large, the participants are senior academics who are very comparable both in terms of career age, academic rank, and total career publication output. Three of the 12 pairs noted significant differences in career age. Only 1 pair characterized their relationship as a mentoring relationship. Six of the 12 pairs are a couple. Along with the longevity of the collaborative relationship, these characteristics make this an unusual, if not unique, group to study. It is important to envision these as career-equal relationships, not mentoring relationships.

### Findings

When asked how they negotiated substantive differences of opinion with an identified collaborative partner, participants' responses can be grouped on a continuum. Members of the first group replied that significant differences of opinion are impossible or unlikely (n=10 or 5 pairs). I called these the Like-Minded. Members of a second group, The Triangulators, recognized the possibility of differences of opinion but said they were not likely to be about

significant issues (n=6 or 3 pairs). A third group, the *Multiplists*, stated that differences of opinion are both frequent and to be expected (n=8 or 4 pairs).

### *Group Differences*

This section provides some detail about the differences between the three groups.

*Group 1: The Like-Minded.* Ten long-term collaborators said that substantive differences of opinion about a research finding were either highly unlikely or impossible. Some dismissed the possibility of a difference of opinion on anything but trivial matters with the explanation that they shared a very similar worldview or set of basic assumptions. Others, most notably those who worked from a positivist paradigm, reported that they would continue to collect and analyze data until any possibility of differences in interpretation was eliminated. An economist's response to the interview question forcefully illustrates the attitudes of this group. She flatly rejected the possibility of differences of opinion, saying: "I've never encountered any [differences of opinion] because there sort of aren't any opinions. It all comes down to stacking up proof."

There is a counterintuitive finding about members of this group. Even though three of the five pairs in this group were trained in different academic disciplines (political science-economics; history-English; social psychology-educational policy), the distinguishing characteristic of members of this group is that they share deeply held views and assumptions. They either came together as collaborators in the first place because they thought alike or they grew over time to share a very similar perspective or point of view on matters central to their work together.

One member of a pair of women collaborators described this common core of shared assumptions. Trained in different but closely allied fields, one member of the pair said:

We share a view of the world. We share a set of theoretical and practical orientations about the way the world works and how one does things and what is important to do... Also, our writing styles are very similar. That is what drew me to the collaboration to begin with. I felt I could have written some of the stuff of hers I read. I don't usually feel that way.

*Group 2: The Triangulators.* Six long-term collaborators indicated that they experienced significant differences of opinion occasionally, but they characterized these as not being about meaningful issues. Members of each of the three pairs were trained in the same academic field (sociology, special education, anthropology).

Members of the second group interpreted differences of opinion to be an outcome of looking at a question or problem from a different angle or perspective. This often translated to debates about what to emphasize in a publication, rather than to what they interpreted as genuine differences of opinion. It is possible that comparable disciplinary training makes it easier for collaborators to recognize subtle differences in thinking and to interpret these as insignificant because they share basic paradigmatic assumptions.

A member of the only couple in this group described this phenomenon of angularity in a way that seems contradictory at first. Trained, as is her spouse in communication studies, the woman in this pair

seemed to discount differences in their theoretical perspectives even though she and her spouse had been asked to write a book about it.

We've developed different theoretical perspectives, but I would guess that most people see more commonality than difference...When we're coming at anything from our different theoretical perspectives, we're not very far apart. We just have different explanations for the same phenomenon, but we are really trying to describe different domains anyway. So, we are not really that far apart.

It is possible that this participant's comments simply reflect discomfort that others might perceive that she and her husband disagree. I believe that her comments reflect such familiarity with her partner's viewpoint that she recognizes that they are theorizing about phenomena whose difference is so subtle that others are likely to think they are dealing with the same domain. This is how she rejects the notion that this experience actually reflects a difference of opinion.

*Group 3: The Multiplists.* The eight participants in this group differ from members of the other two groups in that they not only reported that they frequently experienced differences of opinion, but they viewed these differences of opinion as routine and to be expected. Members of this group acknowledged that they agreed about some very central, core assumptions, but disagreed about others. Members of this group seemed to have developed a way to embed these differences in the collaborative process so that they did not interpret the differences as conflict and avoided letting them become harmful to the relationship.



A member of a male-female pair (not a couple) trained in different academic disciplines (psychology and comparative education) described how different perspectives are built into the culture of the larger research team. This is possible, the senior member of the team, by deliberately constituting an interdisciplinary team, establishing clear authorship guidelines, and making it easy to talk about different viewpoints. He observed:

Fortunately, most of the stuff we do, there hasn't been a single big idea, but there have been a few. They did either reach some level of conflict. So, what I have tried to do is to push to make it easy to talk about. So you bring this up and you start talking about it.

The other thing is that even when there is really a key idea there is usually more than one take on it. One strategy is to try to incorporate multiple points of view in your approach to research. *Sometimes emphasizing different things can blow up into people believing that they disagree, but they are really seeing it from a different perspective.*

Like the members of the group I have called, *Triangulators*, the senior member of this team is so familiar with the players and with the content of their work together that he knows that they are seeing the same phenomena from slightly different perspectives. Although actually quite divisive to the two people involved in this dispute, I think he is trying to deflate the potentially negative consequences of the disagreement by recasting it as a difference in emphasis.

### Conclusion

Sixteen of 24 participants downplayed the suggestion that they and a collaborative partner of many years experienced significant differences of

opinion. The exception seems to be pairs or members of teams where their epistemological assumptions or culture lead them to view differences of opinion as a routine, and sometimes a valuable, part of the relationship.

Differences in disciplinary training seemed to offer little by way of insight into how members of long-term collaborative pairs viewed differences of opinion. This unexpected finding is particularly apparent in the first group, the *Like-Minded*. Even though three of the five collaborative pairs in this group were not trained in the same academic disciplines, they described themselves as thinking so much alike that differences of opinion were either highly unlikely or impossible. It is my hypothesis that disciplinary differences do not play a particularly influential role among this group of long-term collaborators in part because of the deep familiarity with each other's thinking developed through frequent and on-going interaction over time.

Participants' responses to whether they and their collaborative partner experienced significant differences of opinion becomes more meaningful when considered within the context of relational dynamics and how people make meaning. It is my hypothesis that members of the first group deny experiencing significant differences of opinion because they either began the relationship thinking very much alike or they grew to do so over time. Members of the second group recognize difference of opinion are possible because they are so familiar with each other's thinking that they are aware that they are looking at the same question from a slightly different angle. Members of the third group view differences of opinion as routine because they recognize that while they share a core set of values and worldview, they know each other well enough to recognize that they think differently on some ways. Embedded within the

community that Parker Palmer wrote about, familiarity allows these collaborators to find ways to define differences and avoid conflict or to subtly diffuse it through the process they utilize.

*Implications for Practice*

Findings from the research have direct implications for practice, particularly for those who are dedicated to crafting collaborative communities that embrace identity, personality, and paradigmatic differences. Long-term collaborators are far more likely to have to confront differences of opinion that might be sidestepped by their colleagues who interact work together for the span of a single project. It is clear that long-term collaborators do not have to be of one mind to work together effectively. Differences in work habits or writing styles are an impediment that can be accommodated over time. In addition to a shared commitment to an inquiry aim, what does seem critical to the collaborative process, however, is frequent interaction, respect for each other's intellectual authority, and a mutually developed culture that finds a way to interpret differences of opinion as routine.

Although time consuming to deal with, the link to innovation appears to be in a collaborative relationship where the practice is not to erase, overlook, or "split the difference", but to pursue them using a process that is not destructive to the productivity of the relationship. While such longevity is unusual, studying long-term collaborators provides the opportunity to see the ways that long-term engagement with ideas can create an awareness of the places where the differences intersect and to use these differences to meld into something that is innovative.

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