UNDERSTANDING OUR DIFFERENCES
CABHR Scientists Commit to Cultural Sensitivity

There was a time, only a few decades ago, when mostly white social scientists were rightly criticized for a lack of sensitivity when studying minority populations. For example, if researchers studied a nonwhite population, many briefly swooped into the community to gather data and then departed to analyze and publish their findings.

Current efforts by CABHR researchers show that times have changed. Many scientists now acknowledge the importance of “culturally sensitive” research, which involves shifting research methods, assessment tools, and interventions to account for differences across groups. Most current or recent CABHR studies have been developed with a careful eye to these issues.

Focus Groups and Talking Circles
For CABHR researchers, this approach involves getting to know a community before collecting data. Consider the study of depression among Latinos funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and led by CABHR scientist Jonathan Kanter, Ph.D., and Azara Santiago-Rivera, Ph.D., professor of counseling psychology. They suspect that an evidence-based psychotherapy intervention will better treat depression in Latinos if it is adapted to reflect Latino culture. They are currently working to modify the intervention. “As a Caucasian male, I need to do more than just read the literature on Latinos and write something that makes sense,” Dr. Kanter says. “This process is about going into the Latino community, working with Latino therapists, getting feedback from real patients, and working with the community to develop this.”

CABHR scientist Laura Otto-Salaj, Ph.D., is engaged in a similar process with Stories to Tell, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which is studying the causes of resiliency and risk behavior among African American women in Milwaukee housing developments. Dr. Otto-Salaj and her research team only recently began collecting data; they devoted the first year to learning about the community and opening a research center in the neighborhood where these women live.

“Rather than having a research center on campus, where participants may not feel comfortable, we’ve created a research center in the heart of the community,” she says. Dr. Otto-Salaj and her team have also attended multiple meetings and events to establish a relationship with community leaders and get their feedback. This gradual approach has surprised many in the neighborhood. “Their previous experiences have been that researchers have parachuted in, taken data, and left. What we’re trying to establish is a long-term relationship, not just for this study, but for others in the future.”

CABHR affiliated scientist John Dellinger, Ph.D., program director for the Great Lakes Native American Research Center at UW–Milwaukee, has conducted research since the 1990s on Indian reservations, where focus groups are usually known as “talking circles.” Dellinger stresses the importance of returning to a community to share results. “The tribe doesn’t really appreciate hearing a year later that you published the work without coming back to them first,” he says. “They’re not going to tell you what to publish. But they want to be involved in the publication and make sure their point of view is brought to the table.”

Emphasizing Shared Values
Carl Bell, Ph.D., psychiatry professor and director of the Institute for Juvenile Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has an interesting perspective on cultural differences. As an African American researcher from Southside Chicago, he took an American HIV prevention intervention to Durban, South Africa to use in Zulu villages. “Their response was ‘Who the hell are you?’” Dr. Bell recalls.

But he regained their trust by emphasizing that the intervention was based on what he calls “universal principles,” such as the research-supported idea that social fabric around children and families is protective. As long as they adhered to these core principles, “they could wrap them however they wanted culturally,” Dr. Bell says. The two-year process of adapting the intervention to Zulu culture yielded an eighty-page multiple family group-therapy manual, illustrated by Zulu artists to reach the 87
An extensive and growing body of social science research continues to underscore the conclusion that the qualities and characteristics of our neighborhoods can powerfully influence our life course. Recent research suggests that neighborhoods can affect long-term academic achievement, the onset and course of severe mental illness, sexual risk behavior and the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, and the use of illicit drugs such as marijuana and cocaine. Even high-risk college drinking—a topic we have highlighted at CABHR in recent months—is influenced by the characteristics of neighborhoods surrounding a university. The proliferation of retail establishments selling alcohol in proximity to a college or university (referred to as high “outlet density”) adversely affects students’ drinking behavior.

The idea that you need to change neighborhoods to improve lives seems particularly daunting in Milwaukee. Geographically, neighborhood boundaries are subjective, complex, and unstable. Many neighborhood risk factors are rooted in economic disparities in a city that is ranked the seventh poorest in the nation. In the current severe recession, it is difficult to see how we can transcend such economic disparities.

But I believe we can move forward by understanding the fundamental importance of social relationships in neighborhoods and communities. Researchers are increasingly discussing the notion of “social capital,” or community-level characteristics that promote participation in groups, activities, and social networks for mutual benefit. Opportunities for stimulating the growth of social capital abound in this city and create enormous potential for positive neighborhood transformation and long-term economic and social revitalization.

TRUE Skool, a Milwaukee nonprofit organization that works to empower neighborhood youth through art, exemplifies this type of potential. Youths who participate in TRUE Skool projects have transformed graffiti-tagged building walls into positively themed, aesthetically pleasing artwork on Milwaukee’s North Side. (As a side note, I’m pleased to tell you that TRUE Skool will soon begin painting a community mural in CABHR’s new Community Research Center.) The well-publicized early success of the Zilber Neighborhood Initiative serves as another example of social capital’s benefits. This effort has stimulated youth and family involvement in sports, the arts, and community conservation activities in Milwaukee neighborhoods previously characterized by economic disadvantage.

Recent grants and publications underscore the commitment of CABHR scientists to understanding the role of neighborhoods in health outcomes. With CABHR scientist Mike Brondino and former CABHR assistant researcher Adam Lippert, I recently cowrote a chapter about the links between neighborhoods and illicit drug use in a new reference book, Drug Use Etiology: Theory, Methods, and Empirical Findings. (To learn more, visit http://books.apa.org/books.cfm?id=4311501&toc=yes)

CABHR is also committed to coalition-building activities and working jointly with organizations such as the University Neighborhood Association to share the latest information about effective strategies to address high-risk college drinking. CABHR’s newly opened Community Research Center and the launching of the Stories to Tell project puts CABHR research squarely in the neighborhood. CABHR is uniquely situated to advance our scientific understanding of nascent community social capital and its potential for transformation, growth, and health promotion.

I invite you to join us to celebrate neighborhood-based research at an open house of our new Community Research Center, noon to 2:30 p.m. on Friday, September 25, 1849 N. Dr. Martin Luther King Dr., Ste 200. RSVP to mheller@uwm.edu or 414-229-5008.

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What is CABHR?
Based in the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Helen Bader School of Social Welfare, CABHR is a research center led by core academic scientists with broad interests in the addictions and behavioral health. CABHR conducts cutting-edge epidemiological, intervention, and clinical research. Its scientists currently hold $3.8 million in research grants.
NEWS BRIEFS

CABHR Holds CRC Open House
CABHR will host an open house of its new Community Research Center (CRC), noon to 2:30 p.m. on Friday, September 25. The event will include lunch, and a brief program at 12:30 p.m. The CRC is located at 1849 North Dr. Martin Luther King Drive, Suite 200 in Milwaukee. Please RSVP to mheller@uwm.edu or 414-229-5008. CABHR scientists will be on hand to discuss current community-based research projects.

CABHR is currently working with Eliot Patterson of TRUE Skool and Rescomm Graffix to create a community mural in the waiting area of the CRC. TRUE Skool is a Milwaukee nonprofit organization that uses cultural arts to educate and empower youth to become community leaders for positive social change.

Mersky & Topitzes Receive UW Grant
CABHR scientists Joshua Mersky, Ph.D., and Dimitri Topitzes, Ph.D., recently received a University of Wisconsin System Administration grant, which gave them time and support to apply for funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. As a result of the grant, Drs. Mersky and Topitzes will submit a proposal titled “Project Connect: Translating PCIT into Foster Care Settings” to the Eunice Kennedy Shriver “Project Connect: Translating PCIT into Foster Care Settings” to the Eunice Kennedy Shriver

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CABHR Scientists Contribute to Reference Text
Drug Use Etiology: Theory, Methods, and Empirical Findings, a new reference published this month by the American Psychological Association, features a chapter written by CABHR’s Michael Fendrich, Ph.D., and Michael Brondino, Ph.D., and former CABHR assistant researcher Adam Lippert. Their chapter is titled “The Association Between Neighborhoods and Illicit Drug Use Among Adults: Evidence From a Chicago Household Survey.” For more, visit http://books.apa.org/books.cfm?id=4311501&toc=yes

Kanter Receives Grant to Study Latino Depression
CABHR scientist Jonathan Kanter, Ph.D., and Azzara Santiago-Rivera, Ph.D., professor of psychology at UW–Milwaukee, received a three-year, $585,000 grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health to study the use of psychotherapy for depression among Latinos. The investigators will work closely with the 16th Street Community Health Center, a full service medical and behavioral health clinic that serves Milwaukee’s Latino community, to take existing, empirically supported psychotherapy approaches and adapt them for Spanish-speaking clients. The project will determine if cultural adaptations reduce dropout rates and improve outcomes for depressed Latinos.

NIMH gives Kanter its Summer Institute Award
The National Institutes of Mental Health also awarded CABHR scientist Jonathan Kanter, Ph.D., a scholarship to attend the NIH Summer Institute on Community-Based Participatory Research Targeting the Medically Underserved.

The award allowed Dr. Kanter and his community partner, Brenda Wesley from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)-Greater Milwaukee, to develop a community-based project proposal aimed at reducing stigma and increasing treatment seeking related to depression and mental illness in Milwaukee’s African American community. With the grant, Dr. Kanter and Ms. Wesley traveled to New Orleans in August for a week of trainings and consultation on this project with NIMH experts.

New Grant Funds Drug Court Study
CABHR director Michael Fendrich, Ph.D., and Will Pelfrey, Ph.D., associate professor of criminal justice at UW–Milwaukee, received funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance to lead a process and performance evaluation of the Milwaukee County Circuit Court’s drug treatment court implementation. The grant supports both the program implementation and the evaluation.

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COLLEGE DRINKING WORKSHOP BRINGS TOWN AND GOWN TOGETHER

Coalitions of college and community leaders are essential to prevent high-risk drinking among college students. This was a key message shared during CABHR’s day-long workshop on evidence-based strategies for reducing high-risk young adult drinking, held at UW–Milwaukee in May. Keynote speakers included the renowned alcohol researchers William DeJong, Ph.D., of the Boston University School of Public Health, Mary Larimer, Ph.D., of the University of Washington in Seattle, and Bob Saltz, Ph.D., of the PIRE–Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, California. The event was attended by more than 200 campus and community leaders, educators, and service providers from Wisconsin and Illinois, and was funded in part by a grant from MillerCoors.

Drs. DeJong and Saltz described recent studies showing that environmental factors—such as the number of retail outlets selling alcohol near campus, and the existence of municipal fines to penalize students who host loud parties—can strongly influence young adult drinking. The best way to change the environment, Dr. Saltz believes, is for community and campus groups to work together on a comprehensive set of interventions.

Breakout sessions in the afternoon allowed attendees to talk with researchers about related topics, including coalition building and funding sources for college drinking research.

One of the outcomes of the workshop is that it helped to focus CABHR’s research agenda, says Director Michael Fendrich, Ph.D. “It became clear that many college campuses offer evidence-based programs to reduce high-risk drinking, but they are not evaluated regularly to determine their effectiveness,” he says. Dr. Fendrich is currently seeking extramural support for a study he is developing on how existing campus programs may interact with local culture to influence drinking behavior. “I think Wisconsin might be fertile ground to explore that issue very systematically,” Dr. Fendrich says.

In the months since the workshop, organizers have been discussing ways that CABHR can continue to help build a coalition of local entities to address high-risk drinking among college students. Last month, Dr. Fendrich met with the University Neighborhood Association to discuss follow-up activities related to the workshop. Dr. Fendrich noted that these events have revealed a real hunger among service providers and community residents for up-to-date information about evidence-based college drinking prevention strategies.

“CABHR can play a role in this technology transfer,” he says. CABHR will enhance its website to include links to up-to-date research on high risk drinking in young adults. In the future, CABHR may also produce webinars on college drinking topics. In the meantime, podcasts of the workshop presentations are available at www.highriskdrinking.uwm.edu.

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MEET CABHR SCIENTISTS

Laura Otto-Salaj, Ph.D.
CABHR Scientist, Assistant Professor of Social Work, UW-Milwaukee

Dr. Otto-Salaj credits a position with the Community Health Behavior Program (now the Center for AIDS Intervention Research) at the Medical College of Wisconsin for setting her course. “Working with Jeff Kelly and others there showed me how exciting and important community-based research can be, and I was hooked,” she says.

She has since led several projects funded by the National Institutes of Health, including the recent HEART to HEART study, which tested a combined HIV risk reduction and alcohol treatment for at-risk women. The HEART to HEART research team is currently analyzing those findings.

Experiences with HEART to HEART led Dr. Otto-Salaj to her current five-year, $2.9 million study, co-funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development, and the National Institute of Mental Health. Known as Stories to Tell, the study looks at the causes of risk and resilience among African American women in Milwaukee housing developments. “There were many moments while working in HEART to HEART that we as a research team were frustrated with the sheer number of issues that our participants faced,” Dr. Otto-Salaj says. It was unclear how factors such as trauma history, mental illness, and substance abuse worked together (or didn’t) to influence the women’s response to the intervention. “It became very clear in going through the literature that we weren’t the only ones frustrated,” Dr. Otto-Salaj says.

She partnered with Mike Brondino, CABHR’s Quantitative Core leader, to design Stories to Tell using sophisticated techniques such as structural equation modeling, growth curve analysis, and hierarchical linear modeling, producing “a very comprehensive, rather ambitious model, which includes many variables,” she explains. “Improvements in research technology and design allow us to examine more complex ideas than ever before.”

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percent of Zulu parents who were illiterate. The intervention yielded a stronger sense of community around families, stronger relationships between caretakers and children, a clearer understanding about HIV transmission, and less stigma toward HIV-infected people among the youth and their caregivers.

Examining Differences

While this work involves underscoring shared values, it also requires careful attention to cultural differences. These differences can be particularly problematic in surveys and assessment tools. Tim Johnson, Ph.D., director of the Survey Research Laboratory and professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Chicago studies how different cultural groups interpret survey questions differently. “We may get different sets of answers and believe that they show that people from different backgrounds have different smoking behaviors, or different drug use behaviors,” Dr. Johnson says. “But it may be differences in the processing of survey questions, masquerading as substantive differences.”

Dr. Johnson, who is currently fielding two federally funded studies to pinpoint the cultural values of different ethnic groups, hopes that standard survey methodology will eventually change to account for value differences. For now, he’s satisfied if his work prompts researchers to acknowledge one idea: “There are probably culturally moderated measurement errors in almost any survey data that you collect,” he says.

Taking the Harder Path

Research might be simpler and faster if scientists ignored issues of cultural difference, and didn’t involve the community in shaping their research. After all, not all studies support that these adjustments make interventions more effective. But, says CABHR scientist Susan Rose, Ph.D., “if we don’t consider cultural differences, we’ll be totally wrong. We’ll absolutely miss a significant dimension of people’s lives.”

Dr. Bell believes that cultural adaptations increase the chances that promising efficacy-based interventions will actually be put into practice in diverse, real-world settings. And Dr. Kanter adds that this approach is simply the decent one. “I think we should do it just for the sake of human dignity and understanding,” he says, “even if we don’t show outcome differences.”

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Diversity Fellow Aids CABHR Research

Tamarah Moss-Knight, a doctoral candidate in social work from Howard University, spent this past summer as a diversity fellow in UW–Milwaukee’s Helen Bader School of Social Welfare, where she taught a course and assisted CABHR researchers, including the Stories to Tell project team led by Laura Otto-Salaj, Ph.D. At the end of her fellowship, Moss-Knight returned to Howard to continue her research on the experiences of stigma and/or social support among pregnant adolescents in the Bahamas.

Arria to Address College Drinking

As a follow-up to CABHR’s workshop on high-risk young adult drinking last spring, CABHR will host Amelia Arria, Ph.D., associate director of the Center for Substance Abuse Research at the University of Maryland College Park. Dr. Arria will present “Longitudinal patterns of drug exposure opportunity and use among college students: Implications for early intervention,” 11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Wednesday, September 30, in room 280 of the UW–Milwaukee Union, 2200 East Kenwood Boulevard.

Fendrich Gives Carey Lecture

CABHR director Michael Fendrich, Ph.D., will present “Epidemiology of Substance Abuse and Mental Illness: Treatment Implications” at the UW–Milwaukee Helen C. Carey Memorial Lecture, 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Wednesday, September 23, at the Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Division, 9455 Watertown Plank Road in Wauwatosa.

CABHR Scientists Publish Findings


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