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Involving and Maintaining Collaterals

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Collecting data from collaterals to help substantiate the self-reports of participants is a component of many research protocols. In the absence of a specific biological test for current alcohol consumption and with concerns about the validity of self-reports, the use of collaterals increased from 54.1 percent during 1976-80 to 81.3 percent during 1980-84 (Sobell et al. 1987). However, surprisingly little has been written on how to *succeed* with collateral interviews. If collateral data are part of the research design, then we must assume its importance and attend to collateral interviews with the same care given to participant interviews.

Obtaining data from collaterals is often a problem in research studies that otherwise are progressing very well. If we consider the collaterals' perspective, we realize that they gain little, if anything, from the call. They are not being paid for the time involved. They are not the ones with the problem. They may not keep close track of the participant's drinking. Thus, they may not know the answers to some questions and feel as though they are not being helpful or that they should know and feel bad that they do not. They may also feel uneasy about "ratting" on a friend or family member. All of these reasons and perhaps others account for the evasions, unreturned calls, and sometimes outright hostility that research assistants confront when conducting collateral calls.

Collateral calls are difficult from the research assistant's perspective as well. Calls often need to be made in the evening after a long work day, and the collateral is usually a total stranger. There are many unknowns to face, such as the possibility that the collateral will be unpleasant or ask questions that make the research assistant uncomfortable. Also, there is the frustration of getting an answering machine with every call. This may cause the research assistant to postpone making collateral calls or to be less persistent if the collateral does not answer the telephone on the first try. The problem compounds over time, diminishing the chances for completing the interview or obtaining accurate information.

In addition, a research assistant making collateral calls may decide that the data from a collateral is not as important as the rest of the data collected in the study and, being extremely busy anyway, may make only a minimal effort to pursue collaterals who are not easy to contact. Research assistants sometimes complain that doing the collateral telephone call is a waste of time, because often the person named by the participant does not know the answers to many of the questions asked. It is not surprising then that research assistants are often reluctant to undertake collateral telephone interviews.

Sometimes the job of doing collateral interviews is given to part-time people who may be less well trained in research techniques. This means they may be less prepared to negotiate with a collateral who wants to refuse an interview or less trained in how to contact hard-to-reach collaterals. Also, part-time people may not have a strong enough commitment to the project to make the extra effort needed for a high collateral compliance rate.

Consider the Many Dimensions

A multidimensional perspective works well as an approach for collateral interviews. Situational, interactional, and individual factors all come into play and interact during collateral data collection. For instance, a collateral interview is not completed because the collateral is hardly ever home (*situational*). The research interviewer is uncomfortable doing telephone interviews, so makes few attempts at contact (*individual*). When contacted, a collateral is angry at the research staff because the participant continues to drink, and the interviewer lacks the skill to negotiate the completion of the interview under these difficult conditions (*interactional*). Attention to these factors in designing the protocol, in staff selection and training, and in dealing with problems that occur will result in high collateral compliance rates.

This chapter presents methods for involving and maintaining collaterals in research according to the tasks to be accomplished by the various members of the research team: (1) the enrollment interviewer who obtains permission from the participant for collecting collateral data, (2) the Principal Investigator and Project Coordinator who will be setting the standard for adherence to the protocol, training the collateral interviewer, and providing support and incentives for doing the job, and (3) the collateral interviewer (usually a research assistant) who will be conducting the interview.

The Enrollment Interview

The first step for research that involves collateral interviews is to set the stage for these calls when participants enter the study. Taking some extra time in helping participants select a good collateral in the beginning is important, because it will help prevent problems later on. The interviewer should make it clear that "this should be someone who knows you well and knows about your drinking habits." Participants will need to sign a release of information that allows a member of the research staff to contact the collateral.

It is also important to clarify for participants that information they give will not be shared with the collateral, and information given by the collateral will not be shared with the participant. There are two reasons for this: (1) assuring confidentiality puts the participant at ease and thus more willing to name a collateral, and (2) most likely the participant will pass the information about confidentiality along to the collateral, which will later reinforce the interviewer's explanation to the collateral about confidentiality. A script for asking the participant's permission to contact a collateral will assure that everyone is asked in the same way.

To avoid bias and maintain independence of collateral data, the collateral interviewer should be different from the person who interviews the participant. Furthermore, the collateral interviewer should be kept blind regarding information obtained from the participant. Explaining this to participants will underscore the fact that no information about them will be shared with the collateral. The research assistant might say, "Another person on the research staff, who is not familiar with the information you've given me about yourself, will be making this call," once again reinforcing the policy about confidentiality. Going over the details relating to a collateral takes a bit of extra time at an intake session, but the effort will save time in the long run.

The research assistant should also inquire about the best time to call the collateral. Also ask "Is there anything else we should know about this person?" For instance, the collateral may speak a different language, and a bilingual person will need to do the interview. Or the collateral may have a drinking problem and be intoxicated at times. Make a note of pertinent information for the person who will be contacting the collateral. For instance, the participant might say, "My wife knows the most about my drinking habits, but she drinks too, so call her before noon, because after that she may be drinking."

Participants need to speak with their potential collaterals to tell them what to expect. The research assistant should ask participants to explain how much time will be involved and remind them that if the collateral is not willing to participate, they should contact the research staff without delay to relay this information and provide another collateral.

Training Collateral Interviewers

Adequate training of the staff who will be doing the collateral interviews is essential. Collateral interviews and participant interviews are different, so research assistants trained for interviewing one group may not do as well with the other without additional training. For one thing, participant interviews are usually done in person, while collateral interviews are usually conducted by telephone. Also, collaterals have not made the commitment to the study that participants have (nor are they usually compensated for their time), so the research assistant has less leverage in making appointments with them.

Some interviewers have a tendency to accept "don't know" responses more readily from a collateral than from a participant. This may occur because collaterals often have more "don't know" responses, and the interviewer gets into a set of just accepting them. Training should include role plays and other techniques for helping interviewers explore the delicate balance of probing without annoying the collateral.

The Importance of Collateral Data

The Principal Investigator or Project Coordinator needs to convey to the research staff that collateral interviews are an important part of the protocol. Even though the day-to-day supervision of staff and monitoring of interview completion rates may be delegated to a senior research assistant, the Principal Investigator needs to show interest in the collateral component of the protocol; otherwise, the staff may conclude that collateral data collection is relatively unimportant and give it low priority. Training should stress the importance of collecting these data in a timely fashion, maintaining a research perspective, and adhering carefully to the research protocol. In addition, the training should emphasize the importance of research staff being polite, friendly, honest, and empathic during the collateral interview.

Written Guidelines and Scripts

As when interviewing participants, the collateral interviewer needs to understand that the job is to collect data, not to provide therapy. Interviewers should be reminded that hostility or bad behavior on the part of the collateral is not a personal reflection on them, nor is it their job to correct the collateral's irresponsible or obnoxious behavior. While this may seem obvious, in reality it is sometimes given inadequate attention by investigators.

In training, interviewers should be provided with clear guidelines for dealing with situations that typically arise during a collateral interview. These guidelines, which will depend somewhat on the protocol for the particular study, should be discussed during a research team meeting and practiced during role-playing sessions. Knowing how to deal with difficult situations will put collateral interviewers more at ease and will allow them to focus on what the collateral is saying. This, in turn, will make the interviewer more willing to pursue hard-to-reach collaterals. If interviewers are concerned that reading a script will sound unnatural and annoy the collateral, they can say, "I'm reading this to you so that I can be sure everyone gets the same information and is asked the same questions."

Collateral interviewers should be encouraged to prepare for each call. This includes sending a letter to the collateral explaining the purpose of the interview, time involved, and the date and time the research assistant plans to call. The letter should have a telephone number where the research assistant can be contacted if the collateral wishes to change the interview date (appendix D.)

When it is time to make the call, the research assistant should assemble the relevant information, select a place where the call can be made in privacy, and be prepared for resistance, suspicion, and complaints from the collateral. After the interview, the research assistant should thank the collateral for the time spent and also perhaps send a thank-you note. If there is to be another interview, have the research assistant set the stage by negotiating a plan to schedule the next one.

Throughout training, the overriding message to interviewers should be that confidentiality must be enforced. All telephone interviews, for example, should be conducted in a room where the caller will not be disturbed or overheard by nonresearch staff persons. It should be made clear to the interviewers that no information from a collateral may be shared with the participant.

In addition, guidelines need to be spelled out for collateral calls made offsite. Some would argue against allowing confidential information or information that could link a participant or collateral to a study to be taken outside of the immediate research site. Thus, if calls are to be made offsite, appropriate precautions need to be taken. First, no files should be removed from the research site. Instead, the research assistants should copy the minimal information needed in order to make the call. They could, for example, memorize the collaterals' and participants' full names, use only the first names or initials on the interview form, and carry the telephone number separate from the interview form.

For the interviewers' protection, have them block the Caller ID telephone feature by entering *67 on the telephone before dialing the collateral's number. The problem with this, however, is that the person being called may not accept a Caller-ID-blocked call. In that case, the research assistant can call the operator and ask to have the call put through. Issuing a calling card to the collateral interviewer will facilitate doing evening and weekend telephoning offsite.

Supervise Initial Calls

After the interviewers have become familiar with the process, have them call and interview a member of the research team who is experienced with telephone interviews. This role-play can be repeated several times with different staff members until the interviewers feel comfortable.

Next, the trainee should listen while an experienced caller does a collateral interview. As the trainee makes the first few collateral phone calls, the supervisor should sit in on them or have the trainee tape them (with the collateral's permission) for later review. This is especially important, since many collateral calls are made during evenings and weekends when the supervisor is not available to respond to difficulties.

Support and Incentives for Staff

One helpful approach is to stress that the research team is in this together, truly as a team, so if someone cannot reach a collateral, this becomes the problem of the entire staff. Difficulty with a collateral interview can be discussed during research team meetings, and members can offer encouragement and suggestions for success.

For example, if one caller is having difficulty with a collateral, a different caller may have more success. A woman collateral may feel more comfortable talking with another woman, or another caller may have more free time to try to telephone after hours. Designating a "Collateral Specialist" who will be entirely responsible for the collateral interviews is one approach to helping solve the collateral problem. This could be a part-time person, such as a graduate student, who is willing to work evenings and weekends.

Another option is to allow staff members who do collateral interviews to have flexible hours. Since many calls have to be made during evenings and weekends, staff making these calls can be allowed to take time off during the week. Most staff appreciate having this flexibility.

Finally, since it is generally recognized that conducting collateral interviews is not enjoyable, ongoing support for staff assigned to do them is needed. It is helpful to designate someone to listen to the frustrations of contacting problem collaterals and empathize. A kind ear and a big thank you go a long way, as does a special celebration during milestones of the project. Recognition for a job well done, perhaps in the form of a memorandum, is another way of showing appreciation.

Responding to Special Situations

It is common in substance abuse research that friends and family members, who are likely to be collaterals, have many concerns about the participant. They may see this call as an opportunity to find out how the participant is doing or to express their concerns, and maybe anger, and ask the interviewer to do something. In other words, they would like to make the research call a clinical event. The interviewer's task is to get the research data according to the protocol without aggravating the collateral, breaking confidentiality, or overlooking the potential for a participant to harm himself or others.

This section presents some common situations that interviewers may confront and suggest responses for handling them.

What if someone other than the collateral answers the telephone?

Imagine this scenario:

Interviewer: Hello, this is Mary Smith. May I please speak with Ben Gray?

Voice: May I tell him why you're calling?

I: Well, it's confidential.

Person answering hangs up the telephone.

The person hung up because saying, "It's confidential" aroused suspicion, so to be on the safe side, he hung up. What might you have said in this situation? Try to remain calm and confident and give a simple response. You might have started out with, "Hello, this is Mary Smith from Brown University...." (You would not say, "This is Mary Smith from Brown University Addiction Treatment Program.") This safe name dropping gives some importance to your call without giving any information that would break confidentiality. What you want to avoid is being asked, "May I tell him why you are calling?"

If this does happen, try saying something low key and innocuous and end it with a question such as, "Well, I have a message here to call him. Is he available?" This sounds like Ben knows why you are calling. You can explain to Ben later when you talk with him. By asking a second question right off, you can probably avoid having the person answering ask you for more information. If the person answering says Ben is not available, then say, "Well, I'm in and out all the time, so I'll try calling back. When do you think would be a good time to call?"

At this point you no doubt realize that an ounce of prevention might have saved you from this difficult situation. More probing of the participant at intake as to who is likely to answer the telephone, getting a release of information for the person, or sending a letter ahead of your telephone call to the collateral stating the date and time you plan to call might have avoided this situation. But sometimes these things happen anyway, so it is good to be prepared and know ahead of time what you are going to say.

What if you feel that the collateral cannot talk openly for some reason?

For instance, if the collateral is a spouse, the participant may be within hearing distance of the telephone. If you do the interview while the participant or someone else is listening, the collateral may not feel free to give accurate information. If you suspect this situation, take time to ask the collateral if anyone is listening. If so, hold the line while the collateral takes the call in another room or suggest rescheduling the interview.

What if the collateral sounds intoxicated when you call?

You cannot say to a collateral, "Gee, you sound as if you've been drinking, so let's do this later," which you could say to a participant. You will have to say something like, "This is not a good time for me to ask you these questions, so could we possibly plan another time to do it?" Try to reschedule the interview for another time of day. At the same time, remind yourself that someone needs to probe about these things at intake and note it under "Best time of day to call." For instance, the note might say, "Collateral drinks in the evening, so make the call in the morning between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m."

What if the collateral starts asking you questions?

The following scenario is not uncommon:

I: "I'd like to ask you some questions about how Teddy has been doing over the past 3 months."

C: "I know Teddy is lying to you about how much he drinks. He lies to me all the time. He thinks I don't know he's drinking. But I can smell it on his breath, and I find his bottles tucked away all over the house. Did he tell you about getting that DWI last weekend? I don't think he's getting enough treatment in your study. I think he needs to go to an inpatient program. Don't you agree?"

> *I*: "I understand your concerns about Teddy, but to protect confidentiality, I can't talk about that, just the way I can't tell Teddy anything you say to me. I'm sure you understand. I can, however, ask our Project Coordinator to call you. Would you like me to do that? Okay, fine. Now to get back to the questions..."

How the Project Coordinator is going to handle the call to this person is not your problem. Leave that to the Coordinator, who knows what to do in these situations, and get on with collecting the data.

What if the collateral asks advice on how to deal with the participant and his substance abuse problem?

This is a frequent occurrence. Instead of giving advice, empathize and use reflective listening to convey your appreciation of the difficulties. Then defer the collateral to a higher authority, usually the Project Coordinator, who can deal with the situation according to the research protocol. The conversation might go something like: "You say you're at the end of your rope [or whatever the collateral said]. Alcohol problems put such a strain on the family. Would you like to speak with the Project Coordinator?"

What if the collateral states that he is dissatisfied with the study or that it is not helping the participant?

This does happen, and it would be easy to become defensive at this point, so it is important to be prepared. A possible response is, "We [or the investigators] are interested in any comments you would like to make about the study, and I would be happy to relay your concerns to the Project Coordinator and have him call you. Or you could call him yourself."

What if the collateral reports that he is afraid the participant is going to harm himself or others?

Make sure to take the proper steps for homicidal or suicidal ideation risk according to the protocol for your institution and defer the interview to a later date. Usually this would include having the collateral speak with the Project Coordinator or Principal Investigator immediately if possible. If you are making your collateral call offsite, which is often the case, and you feel a person is at risk, you will need to call 911 and give the operator the information. This means that when making calls offsite, you should remember to bring all the information you might need (such as the address of the collateral or participant) with you. In the situation of suicidality or homicidality, confidentiality may be broken in order to obtain help.

What if the collateral asks for a treatment referral for the participant, or the collateral asks for a treatment referral for himself?

Collaterals can be assured that the project has a list of possible sources for treatment and be told that they can call the office or the Project Coordinator will call them if they prefer. A suggested response is, "We do keep a list of sources for treatment that hopefully could be helpful for you, but the Project Coordinator is the best person to speak with about this. Would you like him to call you?"

What if the collateral is just generally angry for reasons unknown?

He may say, "How long is this going to take anyhow?" or "This research is a waste of the taxpayers' money." At this point, you need to remind yourself that the collateral probably is not angry with you personally and proceed politely. A proper response would be, "I appreciate the time you're giving me, and there are only two questions left, but maybe you'd prefer to finish the interview at a later date. That would be fine with me." Of course, it would not be fine, because you want to complete the interview right then and there, but by turning control over to the collateral, he will usually decide to finish the interview.

What if the collateral is a talker?

Let's say the collateral is a woman with apparently a lot of free time who is really enjoying the chance to tell you her whole life history. Shape the interview along by saying, "Uh huh" with the proper intonation to let the person know you understand what has been said. Then, without pause, ask the next question.

What if the collateral balks at the questions?

For instance, one collateral said, "How do I know if he's happy with his living situation? I'm not going to pass moral judgments on my friend." Normalize the collaterals' statements and reassure them by saying, "Sometimes the people we call find these questions hard to answer, but ____ gave us your name because he thought you were the best one for us to ask about how he's doing. Either you could try to answer as best you can or if you prefer, I could ask ____ to provide a different collateral." Very often the collateral will continue with the interview. If not, then you need to ask the participant to name another person.

What if you always get the answering machine when you call?

A common problem that arises in doing collateral telephone interviews is that the caller always gets an answering machine. Because of problems that might arise about confidentiality, careful consideration should be given before leaving a message. If the collateral is a spouse and the participant has said it is all right to leave messages, then leaving a message may help. But leaving repeated messages may seem like badgering. Try calling at different times and on different days.

If you have been having the answering machine problem and call and get a busy signal, immediately try calling every few minutes, because often after people hang up the telephone, if it rings again soon, they will answer the call rather than leaving it to the machine. Also, if you again get the answering machine, a message may get results. The collateral may pick up the telephone or may call right back.

If you continue to get only an answering machine and do not make contact with the collateral, this may be a sign that the collateral does not want to cooperate with the interview. Sending collaterals a letter saying that you were unable to reach them and asking them to call you at their convenience may be helpful. If none of these approaches works, the participant should be contacted again to ask for suggestions on how to reach the collateral or to name another person.