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Podcast Interview Transcript

Stephen S. Leff, Nicole A. Thomas, Catherine Bradshaw

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In each volume of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*, the PCHP editors select one article for our Beyond the Manuscript podcast interview with the authors. Beyond the Manuscript provides authors with the opportunity to tell listeners what they would want to know about the project beyond what went into the final manuscript. Beyond the Manuscript podcasts are available for download on the journal's web site (www.press.jhu.edu/journals/pchp). The following Beyond the Manuscript podcast features Steve Leff and Nicole Thomas, co-authors of "Using Community-Based Participatory Research to Develop the PARTNERS Youth Violence Prevention Program," which appears in a special issue focused on community-based participatory research (CBPR) approaches to youth violence prevention. This special issue is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Guest editor Catherine Bradshaw conducted the interview. The following is an edited transcript of the Beyond the Manuscript podcast.

Catherine Bradshaw:

Steve, please tell us a little bit about the Urban Partnership Academic Centers for Excellence, or UPACE for short, Initiative and how your collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control influenced your research on youth violence prevention?

Steve Leff:

The Philadelphia Collaborative Violence Prevention Center was funded by the CDC in 2006 as an Urban Partnership Academic Center of Excellence, or UPACE, for a period of 5 years. We are very excited to be one of ten centers funded by the CDC as academic centers of excellence across the country. Our goal is always to use community-based participatory research to create programs to decrease violence among youth 10 to 14 years of age within targeted communities of West and Southwest Philadelphia.

I think that our project really represents a historic collaboration between The Children's Hospital Philadelphia, Temple University, the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and the Philadelphia Area Research Community Coalition, or PARCC. The universities are the academic arm of our center and PARCC is our primary community partner and leader. The universities bring together the academic leaders in our region who specialize in youth violence prevention. PARCC brings together well-respected community leaders from 21 different community coalitions, organizations, faith-based organizations, and community service providers with the goal of protecting the rights of community members and research. I think our center is unique because it is based on the principles of community-based participatory research. Its best-practice intervention strategies are always combined with ideas and extensive feedback and leadership from youth, parents, and community leaders within West and Southwest Philadelphia.

Steve Leff:

This partnership allows for the development of effective violence prevention programs that we hope are culturally sensitive, developmentally appropriate, and sustainable. Finally, our center works hand in hand with other important violence prevention initiatives in Philadelphia so that we do not duplicate services. We work hard to connect with various initiatives being run in Philadelphia and also with policy makers throughout the city so that we can help to shape the provision of health care services and intervention services in our region.

Catherine Bradshaw:

Tell us a little bit more about how your work together in the center informed the development of the PARTNERS Project, which is the focus of your manuscript in this special issue.

Steve Leff:

A number of researchers and community leaders came together to develop strategies and programs to help promote violence prevention within after school settings in West and Southwest Philadelphia. Our hope was that this project would serve as a model collaboration for other researchers and community leaders across the country who hope to do violence prevention, intervention work. I think within a community-based participatory approach, researchers identify best-practice violence prevention programs that have worked well in other areas of the country and then formed working groups within local recreation centers so that researchers, community leaders, youth, and parents could come together each week and talk openly about the strengths and concerns of their community, how violence was impacting them on a day-to-day basis, and about the aspects of the best-practice programs that might meet the needs within their community. We decided to name our violence prevention program the PARTNERS Program to emphasize that we are only successful as a team of researchers, youth, parents, and community leaders working together as partners to prevent violence and to promote leadership.

Our resulting program and what the manuscript is about, the PARTNERS Program, is a 10-session conflict management leadership promotion program that is conducted in a number of after school settings in which 10- to 14-year-old youth spend time in, settings like churches, recreation centers, programs within traditional after schools, and the YMCA. It is run by trained facilitators partnered with community leaders from the particular after-school sites in which we are based.

Catherine Bradshaw:

Nicole, do you have anything to add about that?

Nicole Thomas:

I think, too, with community leaders it became clear that there was an interest in developing an intervention that included some aspect of leadership promotion. Community members felt strongly that it was important to share knowledge and tools that young people could use to approach life and everyday situations from a positive perspective. While our young people may face violence and aggression in their communities, they must tap into the assets, resources and opportunities available to them.

Catherine Bradshaw:

How do you think CBPR informed your work on the PARTNERS Program and the design of the study to test it?

Steve Leff:

I think that through CBPR we better understood and really appreciated the importance of doing research with the community and that is researchers and community members having equal decision making power and leadership ability. And this is very different from much prior research, which unfortunately has been conducted in not always a very respectful manner within the community. I think this bidirectional learning and the respect we developed for one another over time allowed us to decide that we really wanted to work together, that we would always value diverse opinions, and that we would definitely stay at the table whenever there were differences or problems. I think the commitment to working out problems and communicating clearly even under sometimes difficult circumstances really allows for a more meaningful and ultimately more sustainable programs within the community.

Nicole Thomas:

CBPR informed our work on the PARTNERS Project in many ways. A key principle of CBPR is to include the community in all aspects of research. As mentioned, the community was included in the content development of the PARTNERS Project. In addition, community members are involved in data analysis and interpretation, the dissemination of research findings, and also serve as co-authors on academic papers. Resources and leadership are also shared within the center. A positive result within our project of using the CBPR approach to research is the addition of the Community Mobilization Team, which is now a component of the actual PARTNERS intervention. With the recognition of the importance of developing relationships with community partners, it was decided that resources should be devoted to a team to do just that. Not part of the original study design, this team of community members work on a number of projects with partner sites and actually go out to establish key relationships to support the overall goals of the project.

Catherine Bradshaw:

Steve and Nicole, based on your experience with this and other projects, what recommendations would you make to other researchers and community partners about working collaboratively to conduct research on youth violence prevention?

Steve Leff:

For researchers, using CBPR sets up research so it can answer important questions in the community that are meaningful and hopefully will be sustained long after the research project is over. However, I think it also requires researchers who are flexible, value communication, and are willing to stay at the table through disagreements and tough decisions. It also means balancing strong research principles with an understanding of the best way to meet immediate needs within the community. As an example, when we began the project we had proposed to compare our intervention—our violence prevention intervention—in sites with other sites that were not going to receive the violence prevention intervention. We heard from the community that everyone, if we thought we had a strong program, everyone would want that program.

So we had to redesign the study to meet that need, and what we ended up doing was using a time-lagged version of the study. What that means is that we rolled out the study at different time periods to the different sites thereby allowing all of the youth and the parents to get the program but at different time periods to make it feasible. I think that what this shows is that it is really important to communicate clearly about what the community wants and then to make sure that designs for strong research programs can still be maintained.

Nicole Thomas:

I would suggest that anyone involved in any type of youth violence prevention effort should include the voices and perspectives of young people in developing any sort of intervention or program. One example of how we do this within our project—we have community outreach workers who are actually young people from the communities who are really involved in the process along the way. For community members, it is important to understand the value of research as a tool to identifying ways to address some of the critical issues the community encounters. As such, one of the best ways to partner in research is to gain as much knowledge about the research process, to also understand the benefits and limitations. It is not always easy to balance the research objectives and timelines with the immediate community needs and that needs to be understood.

Catherine Bradshaw:

Are there other things about your project or your collaboration that you think it would be helpful or interesting for others to know?

Steve Leff:

One of the things that we have realized as researchers is that it is always important to consider the immediate needs of the community when we are doing research and how we can meet those immediate needs. Sometimes, I think it is providing resources. Other times, it is listening closely to better understand how a program could be most helpful if it is adapted. And other times it is admitting that we may not have immediate solutions to the very real problems within the community and that the community is facing, but to also at the same time try to link the community with other people who may be helpful.

Nicole Thomas:

I would say that CBPR partnerships are not always easy, but the benefits in terms of relevance, impact, and sustainability make it well worth the work.

Catherine Bradshaw:

Maybe you could just wrap up by telling us what is next for you all. Are there projects you have going on now that are related to CBPR and youth violence prevention you wanted to tell our listeners about?

Steve Leff:

I think that some of the next steps for our PARTNERS Project is really finding better ways to involve the parents of the youth we are working with. I think what we have realized is with today's economy, parents in our community are trying to hold down two or three jobs at a time, parent their children within these difficult times, and at the same time trying to deal with violence and loss that happens frequently within their families and communities. We realize they need support and resources more than ever, but have even less time in which to receive these supports. So I think that we as a center and hopefully as a leader in the region have to look for better ways of providing services and supports for parents in a way that will work for the community and that is an indeed a goal of our future work.

And, finally, we are always thinking a lot about sustainability. And that is not just temporarily being helpful in developing programs that will work, but instead that the research and training conducted within the community supports the community by enhancing leadership and the skills of the next generation of positive role models and leaders from the local community. It is something that we are very excited about and are really trying to better understand how we can promote.