

Podcast Interview Transcript

Scotney Evans, Daniella Levine, Catherine Raymond, and Katherine Smith

In each volume of the Journal, the editors select one article for our Beyond the Manuscript post-study interview with the authors. Beyond the Manuscript provides the authors the opportunity to tell listeners what they would want to know about the project beyond what went into the final manuscript. The associate editors who handled the articles conduct our Beyond the Manuscript interviews. This edition of Beyond the Manuscript features Scotney Evans, Daniella Levine, Catherine Raymond authors of *Miami's Third Sector Alliance for Community Well-being*, and PCHP Associate Editor Katherine Smith.

Katherine Smith:

My name is Katherine Cline Smith. I'm on faculty here at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and I'm an associate editor with the journal. And I was the associate editor that was responsible for handling your paper entitled Miami's Third Sector Alliance for Community Wellbeing, and the work was submitted for the policy and practice section of the journal. We want to give you an opportunity to tell us a little bit more about the process behind the work that was reported. So can we start by having you give a brief summary of your work, both the what was reported here and perhaps just a little bit of a sense of any ongoing work as well?

Scotney Evans:

This paper started as a little bit of a thought exercise or a thinking paper about how we could work together to fill some of the gaps in our community around building capacity both in organizations themselves, nonprofit community-based organizations, but also across organizations so that there'd be more opportunities to learn together and potentially find ways to intersect and collaborate and build the sector as a whole, not just individual organizations. Early on as part of another group, we did a survey of nonprofit needs in the community, a kind of a traditional needs assessment of what organizations felt their capacity building needs were. And at that point in time in this community, there was nothing going on formally. There were some little pockets of things but not a lot going on to offer learning experiences for people doing community-based work. This paper started as you know what could we design, kind of a design experiment to fill some of the gaps but yet get beyond the traditional thinking about capacity building.

Katherine Smith:

And from your community partner is there anything that you'd like to add there?

Daniella Levine:

I had found Scot and the University of Miami School of Education and Human Development Faculty and as kindred spirits in thinking about community engagement. I worked really hard to find different ways that we could collaborate, including participation in a master's-level program, not to complete a master's but some

master's-level courses on the spec model (strengths, prevention, empowerment, and community change) and got to know Dr. Evans in that regard. It became clear that he was a wonderful academic partner, and I had spent a lot of time on the idea of academic community partnerships as vehicles for social change. And so his interests were very compatible with my organization, Catalyst Miami, and he was the kind of person who really took partnership seriously and wasn't just doing it for an academic credential to publish but was really looking for ways that could long term have benefit on the organization, on the sector and on the community. It seemed like the perfect way to amplify the nonprofit organization's work, Catalyst Miami, to build communities. We had been exploring that in several regards to when he approached about writing a paper that would encapsulate what we were striving to do with our partnership. I thought it was an ideal opportunity and we thought it would be a good way to kind of gel our thoughts so that we could share with others and try to get broader buy-in.

Katherine Smith:

Anything that you'd like to add, Catherine?

Catherine Raymond:

I think Daniella and Scot have covered it very well so far.

Scotney Evans:

I'll just add that, as Catherine's probably too humble to mention, we recognized Catherine's involvement at Catalyst Miami as a real strategic partner for them and her expertise in thinking about capacity building from lots of different angles. We brought her in as a partner in thinking through not only how do we articulate what exists traditionally related to capacity building but how can we learn from the literature, which she has a pretty good grasp on, and help us flush that out not only in the paper but in our thinking about how we want to do the work in the community.

Catherine Raymond:

I will highlight what Scot is saying, is I think one of the aspects that this paper highlights that's particularly innovative when you look at the capacity building literature is that it's not just focused on organizational capacity building, but that's a means to an end to addressing community issues and having organizations collaborate. So it really takes the traditional approach and moves it to where it needs to be to have an impact on a community level.

Katherine Smith:

The last few remarks actually just led us to my next question, which is to ask you to reflect on the strengths and possibly the challenges as well of bringing together individuals and organizations from very varied backgrounds, both you've mentioned academic and community but also possibly different disciplines and different expectations. Can you talk about some of the ways that you think that's either been a strength of what you're trying to do or possibly a challenge to some of your efforts? Is that just so natural to all of you that it doesn't come up?

Scotney Evans:

I'll just speak briefly and then let others jump in. I think all of us have some experience working in the community in nonprofit settings. I think that's right. Catherine, are you included?

Catherine Raymond:

Oh yes, yes. You mean working for nonprofits – yes, absolutely.

- Scotney Evans:* My background is in nonprofits before I went back to graduate school, so the practice context I think is one of the things that ties us together. All of us having some graduate-level experience and Daniella having a background in law and social work, and those things overlap in ways that I think we didn't really even see them as tensions necessarily but certainly as ways to bring our thinking together.
- Daniella Levine:* I wasn't sure if your question also was also about community reaction to this whole concept, and I guess I have to say that I think we're a little bit ahead of our time.
- Katherine Smith:* Okay.
- Daniella Levine:* I don't know if that's relevant to a later question too. We're all looking at this from a larger perspective of civil society and social change, not just from nonprofit operations or you know leadership. And you know I think writing the article will be hopefully a way to engage more people in thinking about this issue beyond the operational side of things. But we haven't really received from the drafts that we've circulated in the community we haven't had a lot of people to really understand the significance of what it is that we're proposing. I hope I'm not overstating that Scot and Catherine. It's a little bit like fighting an uphill battle to get people to see you know that we're really harnessing the forces for good if you will, in a way that will be beneficial, more largely so. Most nonprofits are on life support, so they're not really able to focus on some of these larger issues even though they may agree with them. So yes, it's like we're way ahead looking at the potential, and there's such a gap to close between the day-to-day struggles of these nonprofits and the vision for impact that we see.
- Catherine Raymond:* Some context I think to add to that about at least from my perspective our community is that compared I think to other large metropolitan areas we have a higher proportion of very small nonprofit organizations, relatively young, possibly less kind of professionalized. So and our donor community is also similarly young, so part of it I think is educating the community about what is capacity building, the importance of collaboration, building the sector, because we don't have a history of that. It's not just about training individual skills and fundraising, kind of helping people understand how the sector can work together. And additionally, a number of funders in our local communities who had funded capacity building initiatives in the past I think didn't always feel that they had a good experience with that, and again these were very focused on kind of traditional notions of trainings or some coaching or a project as opposed to a more kind of comprehensive approach. So there's some context also in our community that has contributed to you know what Daniella was talking about.
- Katherine Smith:* It sounds like you're talking about community reception of the approach that you all are thinking to take or I guess the future that you see is possible, that it's not a vision that's commonly shared yet. Is that fair to say?
- Scotney Evans:* Yes. I can say more if you want me to.
- Katherine Smith:* Could you briefly outline what that vision is? I think you do so in the article really nicely, but I think it would be helpful to just have you articulate that again.

Scotney Evans:

It's really a vision of community-based organizations learning together and working together for broader social change in the community. This community I think is different in a lot of ways from other larger communities but also has some similarities in that our organizations seem to be really focused on competing for the available resources so that they can develop their own programs in their organizational capacity to deliver those programs and not thinking enough about how to you know collaborate and share resources and share learning and share knowledge and build on that in order to more effectively deal with some of these big social issues in our local community. So the vision is to try to create the conditions where this type of learning and shared practice collaboration and networking can happen. Those conditions don't really exist right now.

Daniella Levine:

Since we've not been able to fully implement the plan that we had outlined, we did go forward with a more limited nonprofit, shared learning platform. And, we brought in national-level speakers and people that would stimulate peoples' thinking about ways that we could really have bigger impact. And I think, Scot, that the evaluation on it so he could say better, but I think that the part that people most enjoyed was the sharing and networking and kind of roundtable learning. But we weren't able to get people to commit the time very often to sustain that learning and to kind of create this community of practice over time, just again because you know they would come out and they'd be stimulated and then they'd be back to life support. So that's my synopsis of the year of offering what we call Leonard Turkel Non Profit Network with the goal of really deepening, strengthening the network.

Katherine Smith:

Let me ask the next question, which is given that, have you been able to sustain your partnership and the partnership that's represented and in this paper, sort of the foundational partnership?

Catherine Raymond:

I can speak a little bit to that. One of the key factors is having you know the right kind of leading partners. The University of Miami and the faculty that are involved in that and the administration that's involved in that are very committed to this, very supportive. I know it can be difficult working with university bureaucracies, but Scot sure makes it seem seamless. And then having a community-based organization lead partner again where there are shared values and shared vision and alignment I think has really been key in moving this forward, possibly not as fast as everyone would like it to move forward but that there's a real commitment on a part of several key partners that this is gonna happen and it's just you know the time and getting the right players together at the right time. And I think that's been a really important factor.

Scotney Evans:

My team has been able to develop a great working relationship with Catalyst Miami, and even though Daniella has left the organization to work for bigger change at the political level, we still keep her close in as a consultant and key advisor to the work. But I think that relationship is really important and you know I know just through working at the university that people that I have to deal with in the administration here sometimes aren't as easy for people outside the university to deal with. Everything

from any type of collaborative fundraising or sharing a budget of any kind or you know getting communication to be responsive makes it really challenging on my end for community partners to have to wrestle with some of the bureaucracy of the university. I think because we've been doing this work together and related work together for several years now that there is an understanding of shared values and what the commitment is over the long haul, so I think we're always able to work past some of the challenges but also look to some of the opportunities that come up as a result of our work together.

The work that we've been doing has now developed into some opportunities for more communities of practice around specific kind of interest areas or communities of interest, and one of them has to do with bringing people together to learn about affordable housing and how best to do work on that social issue. Then we've got something developing around a community of practice related to place-based initiatives or collective impact initiatives. So I think we're making headway little by little, and it's just a matter of kind of staying the course. Even without any broader support from the community, we're finding that opportunities are coming to the group.

Daniella Levine:

So this is Daniella, and I left Catalyst at the end of December officially to run for local political office. My successor is CEO Gretchen Beesing, and she's the lead with Scot and Catherine on many of these initiatives, so I can't speak to how they've developed, but clearly you know it was set in place. We learned together, grew together, practiced collaborating together and then were able to pitch to certain funders and initiatives that we had the capacity to do this work. And struck in listening to both Catherine and Scot a couple of points. One is you know maybe this initial paper was so overarching, generic in community change ideas. And the ones that have kind of taken off are more narrowly tied to specific issue areas or content areas of practice like affordable housing or neighborhood initiatives. At the time when we started, those two didn't exist as possibilities, so they've evolved and then we've been able to take our efforts and kind of intersect and show how we can help build the capacity in terms of the substance but also in terms of the collaborative efforts of the group and the joint learning and the advocacy. So I think that there's more of an appetite for the work in the context of a specific change issue.

Katherine Smith:

Before I move on to talking about implementation, is there anything else about your partnership style or the partnership itself

Daniella Levine:

Yes. My other point was that community university partnerships are so important to my way of thinking to really bring together the best that each shares. But typically those partnerships are skewed towards the institution, and the community partner is not really honored as an equal partner. And the whole field of community-based participatory research is something that Scot adheres to deeply. Most people think of it in the clinical research aspect, but here we are talking not clinical practice but community practice. And so in a way, and I don't know, Scot, maybe I'm saying the obvious, but it seems to me that really what you've done is really demonstrate what it looks like to do community-based practice with partner organizations, not just with

individual clients, you know more at a systems level. So I think like if that has not been listed, I think it's really important to list that out, because Scot was bucking his own institution sometimes in this regard. You know this is not a cultural norm, so he really had to persist in this to make it happen.

Catherine Raymond:

I'd like to highlight that as well, because there is a lot of rhetoric I think in the academic community about universities connecting with their community and developing relationships. But it is often a very unequal partnership, and these are equal partnerships where each brings different strengths. And in addition to just the university in the community-based partnership, I think this partnership is also looking more broadly at who else do we bring into the relationship to further the effort. So in the case of the field that I represent, you know the consulting pool, looking at you know how can local or national consultants also support the work that's going on, so really pull – and then of course looking at funders but really looking broadly at who do we need to bring in and how can we build on the strengths of each. And I think that in practice that has been working well.

Katherine Smith:

I wanted to make sure that we had an opportunity to finish by talking about the potential impact and the dissemination of your work. And so the two areas, the first would be to hear you articulate what you see as the value of this work for the communities or the partners that you represent, and then we'll go onto the next question.

Scotney Evans:

Just a quick clarification, so you're asking about the communities we represent, meaning in my case the university, or?

Katherine Smith:

Actually one of the lovely things about all of you is that it doesn't seem like you are in such distinct camps, but I think thinking yes, Scot, I would say that for you to particularly be mindful of the academic community as well as the nonprofit community.

Scotney Evans:

Well I'm a community psychologist, and to some degree I'm always thinking about that intersection of research and practice. And I mean I really enjoy bringing frameworks from my discipline and other disciplines to the community to talk about how they might be useful in practice, and at the same time I really enjoy kind of embedding myself in the practice context, whether it's an organization or a collaboration, to hear and see their successes and struggles with the work and how some of the frameworks that I might know about don't really even apply. And so I'm able to modify my understanding of theory and of some of the academic concepts that I'm working with and teaching about frequently. So that's so important to me and even in writing this paper to be able to embed my thinking in what we were trying to do together in how a lot of the stuff that I had been learning over the years and maybe even been teaching about wasn't necessarily relevant in the context of larger social change, and it forced me to think together with my partners about you know how we could maybe craft something that's a little bit different that brings in the wisdom of the community connected to and sometimes even in direct contradiction to some academic theory.

So that's an ongoing piece for me, and as we put this out there, then we're getting feedback from others about okay well this sounds great but it's you know here are some things that we could do differently, and maybe it's not gonna work as a whole like Daniella said but maybe we can try some experimenting with parts of it and getting some kind of real-time feedback on how it works and modify it as we move forward and adapt.

Katherine Smith:

Great. I think that's a wonderful perspective. Daniella or Catherine?

Daniella Levine:

Well I'm looking here, ironically enough, at my e-mail, and at this very moment in came an alert from Catalyst Miami community-based organizations-based impending funding cuts. And you know the county budget is very tight this year, and apparently across the board cuts have been proposed for the dollars that go to community services. And you know this is kind of where Catalysts thrive when people come together against a joint adversary, common adversary. And I'm hopeful that whatever role it is that Catalyst can play that it'll be informed by— because really I have been the linchpin for that organization's collaborative work for 18 years, and by stepping aside I've really created a space for that organization to reflect a kind of practice that's bigger and better than just me as its leader, now former leader. And so I feel that what we've been able to do through this partnership is really embed that practice and that learning and more people within the organization. And you know we're only talking about a paper here, but a lot of other collaboration has gone on between the university and Catalyst and with Catherine helping in a real thoughtful leadership way. So these are relationships that really go beyond what's in the paper. But so I think that hopefully we're creating a platform to really work more strategically across the sector to meet the needs of the community.

Katherine Smith:

My final question is just to really isn't a question but just an opportunity for you all to tell us anything else about the partnership, the work, the initiative that we need to know in terms of its contribution to addressing health disparities, particularly in your local community?

Catherine Raymond:

I think an important thing to remember, this is a very good model. It's grounded in both research and practice. It builds upon some relationships in the community and the realization that it takes time, longer than we all hope, and that diligence and finding the folks who are kind of already primed and ready to go and beginning to work with those. And then Scot was talking about a couple of communities of practice where that seems to be happening, and then that begins to create momentum and attract others and you get that kind of snowball effect, and I think that's what's occurring.

Scotney Evans:

I'll just add that as I said at the beginning, we were hoping that this would be provocative in some way, and I do think there is some power to articulating a vision and putting it out there even though it's not necessarily a research project, like a normal publication in this case. But taking our experiences and putting our heads together and crafting a vision that we can put out there to see if people resonate with it, if it can disrupt some thinking about traditional notions of capacity building and most importantly that maybe it will actually lead to some practice and policy change.