

## Podcast Interview Transcript

Richard Suminski and Kate Cagney

In each volume of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*, the 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 website ([http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/progress\\_in\\_community\\_health\\_partnerships/multimedia.html](http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/progress_in_community_health_partnerships/multimedia.html)). The following is an edited transcript of the Beyond the Manuscript podcast.

*Kate Cagney:*

I thought we might start with some broad questions about the context of your research and its policy implications. Your paper offers a rich and varied approach to the understanding of physical activity situated in the community or neighborhood. How do you think these findings might inform the policy process, how we might think about new initiatives that would focus on physical activity? Not just physical activity that is initiated through individual-level behavior, but physical activity that is meant to be encouraged by the larger community context.

*Richard Suminski:*

The first thing that comes to mind is governments and how they structure policies to affect what we do at the community level. That is, the one thing we can consider is those types of policies at the local government level or even at the federal and state level. But what we found was that the policies that are related to the community – in the community such as policies at schools, policies at local businesses are what really drive what we try to do. What really got things moving and going were the local policies.

Not the government policies, not the federal, state, but the policies of local entities in the community. We surveyed local businesses, small businesses in our community and we tried to find out if they had any policies, not just for their employees to be physically active, but for doing things in their community to promote physical activity. This was very interesting. We found that about 30 percent actually had policies for doing some type of promotion of physical activity in their local community, but they were very important.

For example, sponsoring a youth basketball league, buying t-shirts and things like that. But we also found that of small businesses that we interviewed, 70 percent thought they should be doing something for the local community. They also saw that it was a great way to advertise and get something in return from it.

Another example would be the school. There were two schools in our community. We had to get them to sort of adjust their policies. They didn't get it in writing, but to come up with a plan or policy for opening up the school after hours for the community residents to do a basketball league. Churches were the same way. We had to get policies in the churches for them to open up their areas for our programs.

From that perspective, policies to me seem to be more on a local level. We could mandate things at the state or local government levels that would help community people work on policies like that. Get those in place.

*Kate Cagney:*

That might provide resources I would imagine.

*Richard Suminski:*

We didn't really need a lot of resources to do that because, for the small business example, their putting a little bit of money into the community to promote physical activity is a great way to advertise. Many of them have budgets for to do that. So it might just entail having someone to organize the creation of these policies and to get people to see the value of them.

*Kate Cagney:*

I think that point leads well to the next notion of how community-based participatory research (CBPR) contributes to that. How could it contribute both to the larger policy initiative or policy process, but also how does it – how do you think it directly contributes to the likelihood that communities develop effectively?

*Richard Suminski:*

I think it's probably the ultimate way to do it because it allows the community people to experience first hand what this idea of research is. They come up with all the ideas, and they have input on everything. I noticed that the interest, the motivation, the level of involvement was drastically enhanced by allowing them to sit with us and discuss what we wanted to do not only from a health promotion perspective, but from a research analysis perspective.

They didn't quite understand all the details, but they knew that, "Hey, we need to evaluate what we're doing in order to see what works and what doesn't." And they saw a direct application because when we go to develop a program, boom there it was. It was in place and people were using it, and we're studying it. So it wasn't like it was three, four years out, let's go back and try to implement this in the community and get some benefit for 'em.

*Kate Cagney:*

Sort of that retrospective, more conventional approach.

*Richard Suminski:*

Right.

*Kate Cagney:*

Well, let's take that idea and consider the flip side. How do you think that CBPR was critical to your research process? You described how you think it mattered in terms of how the community saw the research and what they were able to glean, but how do you think it informed your choices?

*Richard Suminski:*

Well, it – you do have to kind of step back and say, "Okay, this is a little different than a – say a standard scientific research – like a laboratory approach." You can't really control everything. You try, and you try to do as much as you can to keep things under control. But obviously things pop up when you're dealing with this type of research.

I think that it showed us that you could get some very, very good data from this approach. Although there are threats to external validity, I think that what you get out of it is even more rich, because it's what's going on. It's the practical reality. When you're working with communities that's what you need to expect.

*Kate Cagney:*

Well, I think too if you're really considering how implementation might work.

*Richard Suminski:*

Exactly.

*Kate Cagney:*

You have to take it to the next step.

- Richard Suminski:* Exactly.
- Kate Cagney:* And really see all the places along the way, all the stages in which questions need to be asked or issues need to be considered in order for it to move from really hypothesis testing to – right, to some realization of a particular program.
- Richard Suminski:* I think that’s what we were trying to do too is to see how we could move that over to, “Okay, what happens when the community people are doing the evaluations? What happens when they’re actually interpreting the data? What response would they have?” I think that will be a critical next step that we want to follow up on.
- Kate Cagney:* I wanted to speak with you for a moment particularly about methods. I know in this study you employed a pre test/post test design to try to examine what difference might it make if we initiate a number of programs in one community and then examine a similar community where those programs were not initiated and try to see what difference it makes. Were able to ratchet that a up a bit and think about some kind of randomized experiments, where you might employ one specific program in one neighborhood and potentially another in another set of neighborhoods.
- I guess what I’m thinking about are programs like the Moving to Opportunity experiment, where individuals are moved from one community to another and then their outcomes are followed. Things like educational attainment or adherence to the labor market. In this context, what might we do at the neighborhood level where people remain in place and we initiate an experiment where they are.
- Richard Suminski:* We thought that this was a very rewarding project, and we can apply it broadly. It’s a good template. Not every community will come up with the same stuff. They won’t do tai chi, litter pick up. They will come up with different things.
- However, the basic premise of the program is to work at a grassroots level and build from the bottom up. Instead of imposing aerobics classes three days a week on them, we let them develop what they want. From that perspective we can apply this and take it to other communities. We are now trying to expand this.
- Since the unit of analysis is the community, we need community level indicators. That’s very important to us. There are community level indicators. We developed in this project objective measures of physical activity at the community level.
- We looked at the changes in environments and how many programs and how clean the environment was and so forth. These are our community level indicators. What we want to do now is get a larger pot of money to expand this and do a randomized design. Probably a delayed treatment design, where we take more communities to give us enough power, from a statistical point of view, to actually go in and look and compare communities who underwent the Neighborhoods on the Move program and those who didn’t.
- That is our next step and that’s what we’re trying to do right now. And we feel this program isn’t just for the one community that we worked in. It’s something that can be taken to other communities and developed and be successful with.
- Kate Cagney:* So it seems from what you’re learning now one could imagine informing some kinds of experiments like that.

*Richard Suminski:*

Exactly. One very interesting thing is what happens. Do you have to go into every community and sort of drop this seed, the Neighborhoods on the Move seed, or can you go into one community and let it expand out into its fringe communities? I think we were starting to see that with this Neighborhoods on the Move. In other words, we were working in one particular community.

We noticed that communities adjacent to that one were starting to pick up and give us calls, and we were getting contact. From that perspective it might be interesting to look at is this as a seed you drop and let it expand or do you have to drop a bunch of seeds all over the place and let them grow together. I think that that would be an excellent question to answer.

*Kate Cagney:*

It's interesting to try to measure I guess what we might describe as spill over effects.

*Richard Suminski:*

Exactly. Spill over.

*Kate Cagney:*

From various communities and where it might happen for some programs and not others. If we think about school systems that bridge communities, maybe that's one way in which the information would be transmitted.

*Richard Suminski:*

I think people do catch wind of what's going on in other communities and they really become interested. This was done in Columbus, Ohio. But in Kansas City I've started to discuss this with neighborhood leaders, and I have received a huge response.

They all want to be part of it. They want more information. I've gotten great responses from organizations in the city that work with communities. It's just a hot topic I guess right now. They like the idea of it being grassroots, that they can grow their own program.

*Kate Cagney:*

Actually, that comment harkens back to some early work by Jane Jacobs. I'm thinking about her text *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. She talks a lot about how communities provide a certain sort of infrastructure that facilitates interaction between neighbors. Where they make eye contact. Where they may not know one another's names, but they know they belong to this particular community.

In her work she describes things particularly for the physical infrastructure: parks, active community and commercial venues. And she describes these components of communities animating street life and encouraging people, as I said, to see and know one another. From your study how you think the physical infrastructure in particular, from your two communities, played a role in the results that you describe in this work and I mean is there something to exploit from learning more about the physical infrastructure?

*Richard Suminski:*

Well, first I'd like to say that we matched these communities so that they were very similar in infrastructure. Inner city grid street patterns. They had parks. They had schools available.

What we found was really interesting. Once we got into the community we were working we realized that there was just a ton of places and opportunities to do programs. It didn't necessarily have to be a gym or a community center. We found four churches that had spaces. We had two schools that came on board.

We had a community center nearby that also wanted to do programs. One thing that they thought of doing was satellite programs because it was very hard for the community residents to get across this busy road to the community center. So they thought of, "Hey, can we do satellite programs where we can go out in the school and offer a class or go out in a church and offer a class?"

*Richard Suminski:*

Every community we've been in here in Kansas City has these amenities. They may not have a school, but they'll have a park and they'll have a church and they'll have all these things. They exist. The problem is people don't know how to utilize them.

So they sit there, and this might go back to that policy question, "Well, no we can't have anyone in the school after 5:00." "Why not?" "Well, it's policy." "Can we change that?" So I think it goes back to that.

It's just getting the community people to realize that it's there and, "Hey, why not use it?" And getting – opening those doors is not hard. People realize that, "Hey, this is beneficial. It's good. It doesn't really cost us anything. Why not do it?"

Parks are free. The thing about parks, though, you have to make sure they're safe and clean or else people won't want to go. So what'd we do? We had the community people, maybe one of the church groups, go over to the park, clean it up. And also people were starting to get out so we had people going out saying prayers while they were walking in the community.

One of their goals was to say prayers. Another was to show a community presence and so safety became better in that area. All these things went together. Identifying the infrastructure, getting people to open it up, change their policies and then getting people to actually run the programs from the community in those places. But every community has the infrastructure. There's no doubt in my mind.

*Kate Cagney:*

The way you're describing it and structuring it that there were lots of opportunities for feedback mechanisms, if you will. So people realizing, "Oh, the school could provide this form of opportunity if only we change the policy so that it could be open later than 5:00."

*Richard Suminski:*

Exactly. This goes back to the nature of community based research. People in the community have a vested interest and so they're more likely to say, "Well, you know what? We can change the policy. We can have the doors open for you at 6:00 and you can use the gym."

Because they understand what's going on. It's – you're just not a researcher coming in and saying, "Hey, open up the gym. We want to run an aerobics class." There's more – there's a better connection with the community people and the academic partners. As I said, every community does have the infrastructure. They have parks and things available. They also have the resources and people. They're there. I mean we found a gentleman, an elderly gentleman who was the national horseshoes champion, who lived in our community. He said, "Hey, I'd love to teach elderly people how to throw horseshoes. Can you put a horseshoe pit at the local school." Well, an entrepreneur that was from the community, who now had a construction company said, "Hey, no problem."

*Kate Cagney:*

That's a great example.

*Richard Suminski:*

Most of the programs didn't require anything. We offered a small amount of money if people wanted to buy t-shirts or water bottles. But for the most part they invested – the main resource was time. Many of the community people, who led these programs, were already doing this stuff.

A mother who just had a baby was walking her baby down the street for exercise. She said, "I'd love to have people join me." So she started to get other people to go with her.

*Kate Cagney:*

I'd like to close our conversation today by asking you about next steps in the research process. You alluded to these when you were talking about the design issues that we described and thinking about

possibilities for experimental designs. I wanted to reintroduce that notion and have you think a little bit about how you might extend this particular research project, but also through your larger research agenda.

*Richard Suminski:*

Well, we've already been trying to expand this, and we have a proposal written up where in the Kansas City area we want to do this in more communities. 'We obviously only had two in Columbus. In order to do a community-level evaluation, we have to consider the community as a unit of analysis to look at the changes that might occur. What we're trying to do now is to get funding for a larger scale project.

We will do that in the Kansas City area in a number of different communities. I believe we have scheduled twelve, where we would have six go through the Neighborhoods on the Move program, and six would act as our controls. We can do many more neighborhoods, and they'll be diverse too. Obviously with two neighborhoods, they were very similar so these will be diverse.

They will be ethnic minority neighborhoods as well as low-income neighborhoods and so forth. We want to see if this program can actually be used and implemented and turn out to be successful in these diverse neighborhoods. I think it can because we basically built on what they had available. The next major part of that is sustainability. We are trying to expand the number of neighborhoods so we can get a better look at what we did in Columbus.

The thing in Columbus that we didn't have a chance to do was the follow up. We're proposing now to do a one-year follow up. In other words, we work with community people to get things going. They take over about six months into it and they start to run the meetings and do everything. The programs are in place, they're running those.

We're not sure what happened after that. After that year of being over there, we're not sure if it was there a year later, what was in place. We need an organization that can handle that and so we're trying to put those pieces in place with sustainability

I think one key would be to see if this can be broadly dispersed with using resources that a city might have available or a state might have available. Can we take this and get away from the actual research part of it because we've already done that. We've plucked the data on this. We've shown that it works and now can communities implement it and get some results we could analyze. So that could be the broad picture.