

Podcast Interview Transcript

Alexandra Lightfoot, Melvin Jackson, and Jess Holzer

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 Alexandra Lightfoot and Melvin Jackson authors of “*In My House*”: *Laying the Foundation for Youth HIV Prevention in the Black Church* and PCHP Associate Editor Jess Holzer.

Jess Holzer:

Dr. Lightfoot and Mr. Jackson, thank you very much for talking with us today about your article, *In My House*, laying the foundation for adolescent HIV prevention in the Black church. Could we get started by just describing in brief the project that you wrote about in the manuscript? Especially the purpose of the project and the lesson you learned from the process.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

This kind of a progress lessons learned paper that looks at our partnership process that we took as we reached out to try and implement an HIV prevention curriculum for youth in two Black churches in southeastern Raleigh, North Carolina. And we really looked at what our partnership did. How we engaged the community advisory board. We found a fantastic project coordinator who spoke the language of the churches to figure out a way to open the door to this HIV prevention work. And largely because the Black church, at least in Raleigh, North Carolina, often doesn't want to engage in some of the aspects of HIV prevention, in particular, condom demonstrations, which are a core aspect of evidence-based intervention we had identified that we wanted to use.

Jess Holzer:

You mentioned that you had this great partnership, could talk a little bit more about how your community advisory board was composed for the project, and then whether or not they're still working with you on everything that you're doing today.

Melvin Jackson:

Our community advisory board was developed at the beginning of the project, and that's something we try to do in all of our projects. And given that we were trying to do this work in churches, we were interested in identifying a diverse group of people to be on the committee, but we also were interested in both youth and adult church leaders.

Through our project coordinator, she was able to identify a very diverse group of individuals. We not only wanted people on the advisory board who agreed with what we were doing, but also those church leaders that had some opposition to doing HIV, STD education in the church setting. So we pulled together a group of individuals. There were high school students. There were college students. We had church leaders. We had ministers there. We also had a professor, a retired professor from the university.

Jess Holzer:

You mention in the manuscript itself that you did have some difference of opinion as to how that could move forward with HIV prevention training with the students, particularly that there's a real difference of opinion on whether or not to do abstinence on the education, or to do this fully fleshed out, abstinence-highlighting education, but also included things like condom demonstrations. So how did you negotiate that disagreement, and move forward with the project that you used?

Alexandra Lightfoot:

One thing I just wanted to say is that, this work was building on 20 years of work by Strengthening The Black Family, a community-based organization where Melvin is the program director, of doing Teens Against AIDS, which was community-based, peer-driven HIV prevention intervention. And it worked in so many different community settings.

A few years before coming together to do this work, they had done a series of focus groups with parents and youth in the community. And the parents and youth had really just as I said, it's really important that we reach out to churches and yet Teens Against AIDS had not been able to work in the churches. So that was the inspiration behind this work together.

I wanted to say that because again, the opportunity of the community advisory board, which we pooled together right at the very beginning stage of the process, and partly that's because intervention itself recommends that you really learn from people in the community before you ever go out and implement the intervention. So we wanted to pool the community advisory board to help us think through our process of reaching out to the churches. To really help us think through what the opposition was going to be within the church setting. And we certainly achieved that goal. Maybe Melvin wants to talk about our very first meeting where we had these very diverse forces together.

Melvin Jackson:

As Alex said, we were interested in using the community advisory boards through this entire process, we've got a very dynamic team between the university and Strengthening The Black Family. But as we were planning that first meeting, our real concern was taking this information to the community advisory board and asking them, first of all, is this feasible? Are there things we need to tweak? There's a certain amount of fidelity that we had to adhere to as far as a curriculum, but we wanted to be sensitive to the faith community in implementing the program.

In our first meeting, we were almost ready to quit because we had individuals you take it from the title, not in our house. We had ministers and active youth who were in favor of doing education around HIV, STD curriculum, but not in my house. Not in my church. That was a very dynamic conversation, because they were indicating, quoting scriptures about why and why not. But we also had the youth saying I'm a youth, I'm a member of a congregation, and this is very important to me. And we need to talk about this in the church because this is a safe place for me to do so.

This was a heated conversation going back and forth, but I think we were able to leverage the conversation to the point that the ones that said no you're not going to do it in my church, did not say you should not do it at all. So it was very important as a team that we had to listen to what they were saying, and then use that information to make the tweaks that we needed to make sure as we moved forward.

Jess Holzer:

Particularly the distinction of you can't do it in my church. If I were an individual saying, you know, you can't do it in my church, but I don't completely oppose it occurring. How do you then actually work with those people, or did you? Because you're describing actually using church space to host these meetings with parents and children, and then with the Youth Groups. So I'm interested to understand how you actually could get into the church and get past maybe a little bit of that tension about not doing it in my house as you say.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

Well, several things. For one thing, Strengthening The Black Family had very carefully chosen this intervention, and partly because abstinence is a big part of the intervention, but it's not abstinence only. It's abstinence plus education. And so that was a framing that was accepted by the faith members who were willing you know, to support us doing this.

Second, the community advisory board included people beyond the churches where we were reaching out to develop partnerships to implement. And I think we talk about it in the paper the fact that one of the members of our advisory board was a health ministry member in one of the churches. And that church was primed. Both of the churches are part of this very interesting network that we have in North Carolina, which is a network of 20 churches that do a lot of health promotion work, and are also really kind of open to doing research.

Now they hadn't done HIV prevention before, so this was, an opportunity to reach out to them. In doing so, Strengthening The Black Family has a long relationship in particular with the first church, the church that was most willing to open its doors. And then again, the second church took a lot longer and this is where I'm going to let Melvin talk about our project coordinator who was able to have the conversations with the churches to allay their fears.

Melvin Jackson:

As Alex indicated, both of these churches, even though it took us a while to get into them, they were accepting of this curriculum, or of doing something around this topic. But we're very fortunate to be able to hire our project coordinator who was—she did not have public health experience, but she was very connected with understanding the church environment. She's done 20 years of community outreach work. So she was able to come in with a sensitivity of how to get the ball rolling.

How do you go in? And these were two different approaches. One approach with a church in which the person that's in charge of the health ministry is actually on Strengthening The Black Family's board. So actually before we got this application, she had several meetings where all I had to do is go in, talk to the minister, and ensure him of what we were going to do, and answer his questions. He was able to relay that to the other leaders, the trustees, the deacons, and those that wouldn't let us come in.

But on the other side, going into a church that—both of these churches were fairly large churches—they're very busy. They've got an agenda that's full, and you're asking to add something on top of that. So she was able to look at how we could seamlessly come in and bring this program, and not truly disrupt the programs of the church. And we did it on Wednesday, during Bible Study. We had meetings at the church for the recruitment. So she was able to just through her experience and her just—I can't even describe her ability to actually navigate the faith community. And knowing the right people to talk to.

Melvin Jackson:

The church with which we had difficulty getting into, she knew who to go to talk to, certain people who eventually got us to the minister. And then getting us to the church—the youth leaders who were able to then help us, as a liaison, help us get through the project. Get the project implemented.

Jess Holzer:

I think that's one of the things that's probably most interesting for our readers is to know how they might be able to create, if they don't already have someone you know, who's a member of both one of the churches they're interested in, and a board member of their community group. How they might be able to begin to develop a relationship. Do you have any recommendations for how that might go forward for another research group that would be considering a different setting?

Melvin Jackson:

The word that always comes up is trust. You've got to establish that trust. But I think first of all, you have to be authentic in your process. We believed in what we were doing. But being able to meet the church where they are, or the churches where they are, and be able to—one of the things we had to do, we went to church services. We went to programs that they had. We developed a relationship. And I guess that's the simplest way to put it.

You must develop that relationship first. And that's true whether you're working with a church, or you're working with others, community. Is that you have to understand that there's a hierarchy of how the church operates. And we needed to make sure that we adhered to that hierarchy, and that they were the drivers of the boat and that God comes first. God is you know, the important thing in the rule of how that church is operated. So that we needed to make sure that we were humble enough to let them guide us as to how to get into the church.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

At the end of the intervention, after the 9 weeks of working with the youth, we held a graduation ceremony at the church that was a little harder to get into, the youth minister stood up and you know, celebrated the experience for the youth, and, really turned to all of us and said, I just want to tell you this has been, in our minds, a great success. And it's because you did exactly what you said you would.

And that seems like just a great because we had explained fully what the curriculum was. The time it was going to take. What we needed from the churches. We laid it all out in a Memorandum of Agreement. And we followed each aspect of the process, and we communicated throughout.

This is where projects fall apart sometimes. So we really were pleased that, from their perspective, we had done what we said we would, and achieved what we hoped we would, and that was in partnership with them.

Melvin Jackson:

Building on that, as Alex indicated. We did have a Memorandum of Agreement that was signed by both parties, but it laid out within that what we were going to do. But we also compensated the church for the use of their space for just signing the agreements. So it wasn't just we were going in and taking. We were also giving in that process.

Jess Holzer:

When I read the manuscript, you're talking about a pilot project. So I'm just wondering if you could give us an update as to where you are now with the project. What the arc has done.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

Once we got a second round of funding, a second round of pilot funding to go into a third church. Justified again so that we had more data. So that was great. We just finished that in May. Had another fabulous graduation. And what has been wonderful is that all three of the churches, all three of the graduations, we've had every youth involved, their families, and all the faith leaders coming.

And what's happened is that the faith leaders become big advocates for this. The second round of funding also allowed us to do 6 months of follow-up focus groups with parents and youth at the churches, so we were able to see sort of a slightly longer term impact. People found this incredibly valuable, for the parents and youth, especially around communication, ongoing communication with their children. So that's been great.

We also did a church forum bringing back, you know, preliminary findings to one of the churches, and we're still trying to schedule with the second church. But it was striking, the pastor and the first lady were there, and Melvin, how do you describe it?

Melvin Jackson:

He was very impressed. He's a very forward thinker in terms of the real world. And one of the things that he recommended, or one of the issues that we have—because first of all, we're saying it's hard to get into the church. But another key is, to get into other churches, and we had a conversation around how do you get into these more difficult churches? He indicated that you need to have ministers talking to ministers about this. And he was willing to step up and be on the forefront in terms of talking to other pastors about the work that we've done as well as the importance of them getting involved in similar work.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

Another thing we're working on is now that we have these data from the three church sites, and it goes back to one of your earlier questions in terms of this is an evidence-based intervention. But there are things we can do to enhance its welcome in a church setting, and so we're looking at things we can add to it in terms of for example, the parents really wanting more. So we're thinking about looking at ways we can enhance the intervention for a church setting.

The other thing that's happened that is just so exciting is that when we talked about the community advisory board at the very beginning, we did with a set of adults on the community advisory board, and with a set of youth on the community advisory board, we did focus groups again to kind of look at what are the challenges we're going to face in doing this intervention in this setting? And how can we navigate that? What advice do you have?

In particular, out of the youth focus group, the youth setting, it was really important we need to learn how to—we need education, we need to learn how to prevent HIV and STDs. And this curriculum sounds like it will help with some of that. But, there's so much more going on in our lives in terms of what puts us at risk for HIV. And we really want to think about how we can address some of those issues.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

One of those lessons learned also is that in this kind of work you have to be totally responsive and creative, and think about new ways you can respond to the things that come up throughout the process. So one of the things that we did with the help of our wonderful Kellogg Health Scholar Post doc is you know, figure out how to address these youth concerns, and we developed a youth group called the Youth Empowered Advocating For Health (YEAH), which is developed out of a photovoice project that we did to look at those bigger issues that affect youth. And then one of their findings from the photovoice project was advocacy. Youth need to have advocacy skills. So again, this YEAH group is building those advocacy skills for youth. And so that's going along even as we continue to implement the focus on youth work.

Melvin Jackson:

In terms of other things moving forward. We are looking at other funding opportunities, and we have the luxury of keeping our community advisory board in place to help in actually writing and identifying whether or not we should apply for various funding sources. And I think that's very important.

Another thing that we learned, and as much as we talk about you know, community-based participatory research, we're here talking about research around youth. And it's very apparent through this process that youth need to be involved at the beginning in writing and defining what youth intervention should look like. And that's what they're saying. They want to be involved in things that affect their lives. They don't just want to be acted upon. And we're talking about you want to do CPPR with people, they want you to do it with youth.

Jess Holzer:

Is there anything we haven't covered that you think would be really valuable for readers and listeners to be able to learn about the project?

Melvin Jackson:

We feel very good about this project because it was originated through Strengthening The Black Family. It was work that we were doing. Programs that we were doing. And we reach back to the university and asked Alex to be a co-PI on this project. We were friends, we knew one another. We didn't have formal research that we were doing, but through our relationship. She did not have a HIV/STD experience, but she had experience working with youth and programming around youth. So we found a way in which this project could come together, and us as a community academic partners, work on it.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

One of my favorite things about this project is that the team that worked on it, one of the principles of CBPR is having diverse expertise. And our team just is fully realized; everyone brings this very different but very complimentary expertise that makes it an incredibly rich, whole partnership capable of moving this project forward.

Melvin Jackson:

And this team is still working.

Alexandra Lightfoot:

Still working even though post doc has now moved onto another university, but she's completely engaged and our community advisory board and our youth group, and we're constantly looking for new opportunities to expand on this work.