

## Beyond the Manuscript: Integrating Mixed Methods Social Network Analysis to Assess Community Academic Partnerships

Tatiana Bustos, Sana Simkani and Karen D'Alonzo

Welcome to *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*' latest episode of our *Beyond the Manuscript* podcast. 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.

In this episode of *Beyond the Manuscript*, Associate Editor, Karen D'Alonzo, interviews Tatiana Bustos and Sana Simkani two of the authors of "Integrating Mixed Methods Social Network Analysis to Assess Community Academic Partnerships."

*Karen D'Alonzo:* Good afternoon and welcome everyone to today's podcast. My name is Karen D'Alonzo. I am an Associate Professor in the School of Nursing at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, and Director of our Center for Community Health Partnerships. I am also an Associate Editor for the journal *Progress in Community Health Partnerships* and with me today is Tatiana Bustos and from Michigan State University and Sana Simkani from The University of Michigan. They are coauthors of the article, "Integrating Mixed Methods Social Network Analysis to Assess Community Academic Partnerships," and I am sure our listeners are excited to learn more about the topic so let's start by having both of you introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

*Tatiana Bustos:* Thanks Karen. My name is Tatiana Bustos. I am a social research scientist for King County right now in Seattle, Washington. My background, I have a PhD in community psychology, which is really just a really niche field that is focused on community-based participatory research methods as well as program evaluation, so a lot of my background has been in community-engaged projects and community-engaged evaluations. There is a common thread of trying to support community-centered either interventions, community-driven priorities, trying to shape interventions that drive community priorities or some connection to partnerships with community members for health services.

*Karen D'Alonzo:* Great. Sana, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

*Sana Simkani:* My name is Sana. I am currently an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan studying economics. Hopefully in the future I am going to be working in healthcare and I am hoping to do that either as a practitioner or in academics. I grew up in Genesee County and attended high school in Flint and while I was doing that, I started volunteering a lot in my Flint community because I wanted to look for a community that I felt like I belonged to so that I could create a support system for myself outside of my family while I was in high school. And I came across Flint Center for one of their summer internships and after that I just started working in public health and research and I found that that is something that I am super passionate about and want to continue.

*Karen D'Alonzo:*

Great. So, can you tell us maybe both of you a little bit about the community itself? The study took place in Flint, Michigan, correct? I know many of us are a bit familiar with Flint but if you could just give us a little bit of a sense of what the community is like, the size and the kind of make-up of the community, and how you got involved in this kind of work?

*Tatiana Bustos:*

Flint is a city in Michigan. It is predominantly African American. About half the percentage identifies as a minoritized identity and also about half of the population living there is also below the poverty rate of the median across the US. As some may know or may not know, there has been a lot of events that have caused historical trauma in terms of political—political actions that have contributed some harm to the community members themselves such as the Flint Water Crisis and other results from the Flint Water Crisis. In response to the historical events that the community has faced, there is a huge community movement among non-profits and other community-based organizations to collaborate with one another so that they can revitalize the city itself. Maji Hailemariam has a lot of papers out right now and she works closely with Flint community members in trying to understand how community members feel like their own actions that are driven by their community members—people who are their neighbors, their mothers, who are driving a lot of the solutions to address many of their concerns. So, that is my gist of the Flint community. Sana, would you like to add more?

*Sana Simkani:*

I think you covered it all. I will say that one of the big challenges in Flint going on and that has been going on since the water crisis is the lack of trust within the community, lack of trust between community members and community organizations, community officials. So, one of the barriers that a lot of community members are working towards overcoming is the lack of trust and developing ways that the community can feel like there is transparency and there is a sense of communication and just basically overall trust within the – between everyone.

*Karen D'Alonzo:*

Tatiana, social network analysis is a rather unusual approach to study community academic partnerships. Can you tell us how you became interested in mixed methods social network analysis?

*Tatiana Bustos:*

Yes, thank you. I first came across social network analysis in a communications course and they were talking about social network analysis in a very different context. It was very methodological, there was a lot of numbers involved, and it is more about egocentric network analysis, which is really about the personal level so who is it that this one individual is speaking to and how are those in their support system either improving their health literacy or reducing their risk behaviors. There are a lot of studies that focus in on that; however, I came across this very impactful paper that extended that lens into community health and public health generally from Provan and Varda. He applied social network analysis in the sense of public health administration and how we need to think about the whole level of the network analysis in order to understand how we can address systemic issues.

It is a very niche area related to social network analysis. So, when I started diving a little bit deeper into that I realized there is not much on a community-centered approach to social network analysis. There is not much about partnership-dynamics with community-centered priorities in mind like trying to have discussions about—with community partners about the analysis or being transparent along the way. The articles themselves on social network analysis are very mathematical, which is fair because that is what the field is, but I think I was trying to bring that into a community-oriented space where it is more accessible to different folks who may not have that training and just can see the value of relationships and understanding the quality of those relationships in terms of how it impacts public health overall. That is how I came across it.

- Karen D'Alonzo:* That is really fascinating. You mentioned that word 'relationships' which I think is very easy for community folks to understand. I was wondering in your manuscript you mentioned that the community academic partnership had a network of 27 community agencies and I know myself that when I first started to work in CBPR I was well aware of the conflicts that can occur among academic partners you know, but I was somehow, and now that I look back on this kind of I am surprised about this, but I was surprised to hear that there were often similar conflicts that exist among community partners. For example, folks in one organization would say things to me, "If you want to work with that CBO, I don't want to be involved." Through this social network analysis were you able to identify these sorts of isolated CBOs. As the academic principal investigator (PI) how do you manage these kinds of conflicts?
- Tatiana Bustos:* Thank you so much for pointing that out. I think that is something that we also heard in the interviews so there—prior to the Flint community I mentioned earlier had a lot of community collaboration ongoing. There is a historical context that we walked into, and the community-based organizations themselves had these relationships that were already in existence, that were already navigating other contexts related to policies, related to funding, and so on. I did find a couple of organizations that were constantly working with one another and I didn't get a chance to analyze this because they would fall into different categorical areas—to work with the public health institutions whereas a more grassroots organization tended to stay along the margins of the network itself. And when we heard about some of the reasons or some of the explanations as to why those patterns were showing up a lot of it was related to those historical relationships that were already in place. A lot of it was due to funding, competing priorities, so when we think about public health equity everyone has a right to public health equity and who can we prioritize and how can it be systematic and fair along the way.
- Karen D'Alonzo:* That is an interesting way to look at it. So, when you finished with this study, Tatiana, what did you learn about your community partners that maybe you did not know before conducting this study? Sana, what did you learn about your academic partners when this study was concluded?
- Sana Simkani:* One of the things that we learned about the academic partners is the need from community partners to create information that is easily digestible for community partners. We found that one of the barriers was that the language that academic partners were using did not necessarily translate well into these community settings that our partners were a part of and so we found that in order to create research that can be disseminated and will be eventually implemented into new practices that really does need to occur. One of the emphases that we would like placed on academic partners is to create information dissemination that can be translated in these settings so that they can implement it correctly and reach the audiences that it needs to be reached.
- Karen D'Alonzo:* Okay, so you sort of sound as a student in this process too, you more or less have to be sort of bilingual in that you can handle the scientific jargon and yet you are also capable of explaining this to community members.
- Sana Simkani:* Exactly. Making sure that whatever language you are using or whatever tactics you are using, the community will understand it and that you can kind of create a similar language that both of you speak.
- Karen D'Alonzo:* Tatiana, how about you? What did you learn about your community partners that maybe you didn't know before conducting this study?

- Tatiana Bustos:* I really liked your comment about being a student. I feel like one of the most impactful experiences as a community-engaged researcher is to hear from community partners what they want from academic partners because we tend to just talk in ideas. I guess community partners want us to do this, but to hear it from the voice of community partners that they do not want us to just write about them and their work. They want to be part of that collaboration process and understand concretely—how to communicate concrete results. I don't know, just seeing that desire to bridge so that they can inform their own work while also understanding that we have other obligations to academic infrastructure such as publications or grants or whatever. I think there was a genuine experience that I gained from talking to my community partners about how partnerships should work as an academic to promote their work as well, not just what comes out of the academic institution.
- Karen D'Alonzo:* Right, so this really is an example of this sort of “nothing about us without us” thing.
- Tatiana Bustos:* Yes.
- Karen D'Alonzo:* That is great. What do you think that you will do differently going forward in terms of collaboration? Do you see anything that came out of the study that will really make you want to change the way you collaborate?
- Tatiana Bustos:* I can start. I think I take this work wherever I go, In the current project I am doing now I think about the community members involved. I am assuming you mean like just in our work or with that partnership itself?
- Karen D'Alonzo:* I guess I was thinking specifically with that partnership.
- Tatiana Bustos:* Oh, okay. Sana, feel free to jump in. I can speak to just how the results were communicated back. I wrote about this in the paper about how I met with the leadership team to do a demo of the results and put together a brief that was shared on their website. One of the key pieces was identifying which areas that we can improve on and speaking that to the leadership team. It was focused on trying to clarify roles and participation, so one of the changes that we did see right away was—especially with COVID-19—was that the leadership team started having these individual meetings with community members and trying to clarify like, “This is what we're doing as part of the center,” and, “This is what we can offer as part of the partnership.” So, I think those were one of the immediate changes that I had seen as a response to what was shared from this project.
- Karen D'Alonzo:* That is a positive finding, really, that something you were able to identify in the course of this social network analysis is something that can go—that can be used to improve the collaboration between the community and the academic partners going forward.
- Tatiana Bustos:* Yeah.
- Karen D'Alonzo:* One thing I was thinking about in this study was that you mentioned that social network analysis studies rarely benefits participants and so both of you—Tatiana and Sana. How do you think this study was different? Maybe it wasn't, but it sounds as though it was.
- Sana Simkani:* I think for us, we really tried to involve the participants in every single step of the way so even just me working with the data collection and recruitment, for example. I had already had some sort of relationship with the partners before doing it, so it felt a little bit more natural when we would go to speak with them, and we would try to recruit them for a study. Even just through the interview

process and afterwards, Tatiana and I were in constant communication with the community partners; constantly explaining what we were doing, the outcomes and what we were hoping to gain. I felt like by doing so we really tried to create our own little community within this, our own little research community, because we wanted them to feel like they were a part of it and that they were participating in every single step of the way and that their voices were heard and valued and I think that that helped the overall response rate and then also the quality of the interviews that we had because we felt like the partners and us were already comfortable speaking with one another.

*Tatiana Bustos:*

Thanks, Sana. I'll just add that it ties back to a lot of the reason that we chose these approaches is because of the context that we were working in terms of the community itself. We knew mistrust was an issue and so it was important to really focus on relationship-building strategies. Sana had already had a lot of history with the organizations. She was someone that they felt really comfortable hearing from or calling, so there was a lot of that and as well as interim feedback. There was never—and this was crazy to do because it is very time-consuming, but there was never a moment where I kept information to myself. As soon as information was being obtained, I would share it with the leadership team, and we would constantly keep updated and even to the phase of dissemination of the results or the preliminary results, anyway, that was also shared publicly with the community partners themselves.

I think going back to your question, it is different in a sense where we really tried to prioritize the community itself. Even in trying to increase retention and recruitment for the data collection, I had switched to donations and contributing funds back to the Flint community. They had to select a non-profit that was part of the Flint community and that aligned with a lot of their values. So, just trying to make it seem like there was value here that could be meaningful and even if you don't want to participate. There are ways to contribute back to the Flint community itself. I think that is a really novel approach to social network analysis that I haven't seen. It was a value-oriented approach to try to implement this so thinking of the community along the way.

*Karen D'Alonzo:*

And I think that is difficult in any kind of a CBPR study but particularly in a community like Flint, whereas Sana had indicated at the beginning that there was, and rightfully so, a great deal of mistrust in the community. So, the fact that you were able to do that really speaks a lot about the strength of this partnership that you folks have created in terms of being able to offset some of those mistrust issues.

*Sana Simkani:*

We really did not want to be the type of researchers who would come into a community, collect data, and then leave. We wanted to feel like the community was valued enough to at least know what we were doing and enough to gain some type of results and to gain something out of it because if we were to just leave then we would be the only ones gaining and the community had—we felt like they had a right to know the results that we did find so that they could make changes and that they could use the data and our study moving forward even after we actually left.

*Karen D'Alonzo:*

Right. So where do you see yourself going with this partnership? What are some of your next steps perhaps?

*Tatiana Bustos:*

I think Sana can speak to that; she is still tied. I unfortunately had to move across the—I am in Washington state now, so I think my connections are just tying things up with some of the projects that are being done. I think Sana's got more to share about her ongoing connection.

*Sana Simkani:*

For me, even though I am in Ann Arbor now, I think that it is important for me to continue to stay involved in my Flint community even if it means driving there or finding ways to stay involved on

campus. It is such a big part of who I am. The Flint community has been such a huge support system for me throughout high school and even throughout college, so whatever ways I can stay involved I am going to do until I end up leaving as well wherever life takes me.

*Karen D'Alonzo:*

And that becomes really important because many of us don't stay in one geographical location for the rest of our lives and our careers and so you wonder how do you do that? How do you get other academic people and other community people interested and continuing this partnership?

*Sana Simkani:*

Exactly because you want the work to be sustainable but also you know that you may not be able to stay there long-term just because of life and so how do you go about doing that is a challenge that we hope to find solutions to.

*Tatiana Bustos:*

I will also add, this is so centered to my work as a researcher that even in discussions in projects that I have now with my new employer I am constantly talking about this partnership as a prime example of how you should be working with community partners to develop public health services so I am constantly just tying it back so it is really informed who I am and how I carry out my work.

*Karen D'Alonzo:*

You never really can understand the impact that you have on both on academics and on community people until you see other people start to pick up the gauntlet so to speak. In my own work I've been working with Mexican immigrants for about 20 years now and I recently interviewed the daughter of one of our *promotoras*. I asked her about her involvement in this and she said, "I couldn't not be involved in this because my mother was taking me when I was a little kid," you know and she said, "So I grew up with this sense of the need to look at the needs of the community and to partner with the university to try and come up with things," so the little seeds that you plant now will take root and grow in the future, which is really a nice—it is a nice thought in terms of the impact of your work. Thank you so much for speaking with us today on this fascinating topic. This was really, really interesting and I think it gave us a really—a different perspective on what social network analysis was capable of doing. Like you said, you kind of think of it as a nerdy sort of mathematical process and it really isn't until you see what the end product of this whole study was and how valuable that information is so thank you both for joining us.

*Tatiana Bustos:*

Thank you. I really appreciate that.

*Sana Simkani:*

Thank you for having us.