

## **inSocialWork Podcast Series**

### **Episode 230 – Dr. Jessica Greenawalt: Predicting Coalition Success and Failure: A 25-Year History of Leader Experience**

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.inSocialWork.org](http://www.inSocialWork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo. And Happy New Year. Looking back it was a terrific year for our adventure in podcasting. Thanks to all of our guests and interviewers for keeping us thinking, asking interesting questions, and informing our practice. Plus it was fun. We are looking forward eagerly to 2018. I'm Peter Sobota. What happens when you study the experiences of leaders of leaders and organizations of organizations. If that sounds confusing don't worry. Our guest Dr. Jessica Greenawalt will sort through a 25 year history of coalition leaders perceptions of their successes and their challenges. Dr. Greenawalt will describe what she discovered, the implications of what she's learned for today's social change environment and what constitutes effective leadership of change focused alliances for combined action. Jessica Greenawalt Ph.D. MSW is the program director at the Arthur Project, a New York City based nonprofit organization that serves at risk middle school students through therapeutic and oppressive mentoring. Dr. Greenawalt was interviewed in October of 2017 by our own Dr. Kate Kost, associate professor here at the School of Social Work.

[00:01:58] Good morning I am Dr. Kathleen Kost faculty from the School of Social Work and I'd like to introduce Dr. Jessica Greenawalt who is the program director at the Arthur project in New York City. Welcome. Thank you. And I wondered if you could start out with a little bit of information about your research.

[00:02:19] Sure. I'd be happy to. The research that we are going to be talking about today is the research that I did for my dissertation on coalitions and coalition building. The title of my dissertation was "Predicting Success and Social Change Coalition: Learning from 25 years of Leader Experience." And the reason that that is the title is because my research was essentially a follow up from research that was done by Terry Mizrahi and Beth Rosenthal in the late 80s and early 90s. So as a little bit of background they brought together a group of social change coalition leaders. At that time who were participating and leading coalitions in New York City and the local kind of New York-New Jersey area and they brought together these coalition leaders because they wanted to learn more about coalitions and how they operated their lifespan their life course and sort of the factors that predicted success essentially and also failure in coalitions and coalition building. And so they brought these leaders together through sort of a series of steps in their research beginning with focus groups where they kind of created the items that they wanted to investigate further. And then from those focus groups developed an instrument where they went into in-depth interviews with 40 leaders in particular in the New York City area. So they interviewed these 40 leaders Through in-depth interviews open and closed questions where they asked them about their perceptions regarding the successes and failures of the particular coalitions that they led or were leading I should say at the time. So they got a lot of really interesting information and data out of their research and from my research I essentially wanted to follow up with the same group of participants from their study and find out how their perceptions had changed if they had changed. And I also wanted to interview leaders of coalitions that were still intact from the original study. So now you know essentially almost 30 years later just over half are still intact in some shape or form. And so I also wanted to interview those current leaders and find out how their perceptions compared to the perceptions of the original participants. I also have my own sort of spin and interest in the topic itself. And so I analyzed things from a slightly different perspective and asked them

slightly different questions as they did in the original study. But for the most part I was asking a lot of the same questions because really I wanted to see if these perceptions had changed over time.

[00:05:06] What brought you to the study of coalitions? What was your interest?

[00:05:12] That's a really interesting question and actually I think it's almost an exercise in not necessarily coalitions but collaboration in itself because as a master's student I was elected to the board of directors for the National Association of Social Workers in California where I was going to school and as part of my participation in the board the other student director from California and myself wanted to create an opportunity for both the board members and other social workers and social workers students in California to participate in. What we were hoping would be sort of a social justice project. And we ended up partnering with the Dolores Huerta Foundation which is located in central California and which is a out growth if you will of the United Farm Workers with Cesar Chavez and Fred Rosser, their work still continues to improve the betterment of farm workers and the people who live and work in the Central Valley of California. So our project was to partner with them. Along with California State University Bakersfield to meet a need in the community and also give an opportunity for social work students to practice some of the skills that they were learning while they were in graduate school and what we ended up doing was asking the Dolores Huerta Foundation and what they and what the community needed. And they essentially said they would like some help facilitating a needs assessment for their community. So we brought in graduate students from 23 graduate schools of social work in California. We met in the Central Valley. We stayed with the families that live and work there and we helped them conduct a needs assessment for their own community based on what they had expressed their desires were and then they took that information and CSU Bakersfield published that and they then took that report and took this publication and used it to drive their policy and advocacy work. And so at the end of the day it was a really successful and enjoyable experience for everybody that participated in it and it kind of drove my interest in learning more about why and how. Collaboration and essentially some coalitions work and operate. So when I was creating my my master's capstone project I wrote about this and I started to realize that a lot of the really rich research out there came from. Terry Mizrahi and Beth Rosenthal and I was citing them left and right as I was writing my paper. Fast forward I moved to New York City and through my own network was introduced to Terry Mizrahi and we developed a professional and personal relationship and I expressed to her my interest in learning more and she essentially agreed to kind of hand over all of her data and the data that she and Beth Rosenthal had collected so that I could pursue my own interests and my own research. So it's sort of a long little bit long but interesting story. Kind of. As we'll talk a little bit more about my own professional network and how that sort of got me to this point if my interest in coalitions.

[00:08:23] Sure. Could you describe what you see is differences between coalitions and collaboration. If you would mind just to clarify the difference.

[00:08:33] Sure. I should say that I don't use the term collaboration in my research. One of the challenges or opportunities has been to differentiate between these things and to operationalize some of these terms and in fact the way that Dr. Mizrahi and Dr. Rosenthal operationalized their terms is actually something that changed with me as I worked through my data and my research. So I should say that I didn't discuss collaboration. I think that most people would conceptualize collaboration as being more informal more lax more time limited than coalitions less structured perhaps than coalitions although that certainly isn't always the case. So I view coalitions as potentially being more formal and more structured. But again that's not necessarily always true. At the beginning of my research I operationalized coalitions as organizations of organizations with an agreed upon purpose engaged in influencing an external change target and that was really the definition that Mizrahi and Rosenthal developed. By the time I got to analyzing my data I got to a point of feeling like coalitions should be conceptualized more so as networks rather than

organizations.

[00:09:53] That's actually very helpful because it leads me to my next question about what you learned along the way. I suppose we should start though at the beginning when you began this work. What did you hope to learn. And then we can move into what you actually did learn.

[00:10:12] Sure sounds great. So what I was hoping to understand more about was how coalition leaders define coalition success and the many dimensions that people use to understand coalition success. I also wanted to know what internal and environmental factors predicted failure for coalitions or also could be conceived as dissolution rather than failure. I also wanted to know what internal features predicted success. I wanted to know what environmental features predicted success. I also wanted to know how well social capital theory helped explain Coalition success because I had a sense that there was that using a social capital lens might help us understand a little bit better and I want to examine that a little bit further. I also wanted to know how the specific political fiscal and social conditions that were present during the time of these coalitions influence the development and the lifespan of the Coalition's understudy. And then lastly I should say as I already stated you know understanding how these perceptions had changed over time.

[00:11:19] Could you say just a little bit more about who was involved because you did mention this at the beginning but a little bit more about who actually you surveyed.

[00:11:29] My goal was to have two sort of subsamples that I would be interviewing the first being the group of original participants from the first study so that my goal was to have 40 of the original participants those original participants were self-identified leaders of the coalitions that they were involved in. And that can mean many different things depending on the structure of each coalition. And that's something that I did have them identify further so that it could be an executive director. It could be somebody who everybody sort of agrees is the leader with no formal title. It could be a president of a board. It could be a leader of an organisation who sent. That person to be a representative to the coalition. So the title of that person can take different forms but. They were all sort of self identified leaders many of them are actual founders of the Coalition's understudy. So my first group of people that I wanted to interview were those 40 original participants. I was able to locate and interview 23 out of the original 40 and then I had another smaller subgroup of seven participants. Leaders from coalitions that are still intact from the original point of study. For a total of thirty.

[00:12:50] Could you say a little bit about what kind of coalitions were these coalitions of human service providers or and you mentioned environmental factors so I'm wondering if you had any environmental groups or...

[00:13:05] Sure as I said in the original study they identified or they asked for self-identified leaders from Social Change Coalition. So that's obviously a very broad term and it does encompass yes some environmental groups. There were coalition to end homelessness to end poverty coalitions to address domestic violence. Coalitions that developed to address sort of a specific issue in a community whether it be the development of a new structure or the destruction of an old structure. So for some coalitions it was very sort of time an issue specific but the issues that they addressed really were across the board in terms of sort of things that are just generally concerning to the members of that community and given the broad range then of those coalitions and participants wonderful connection to social capital theory was that a theoretical framework and if so could you say a little bit more about it. Yes I sort of utilize a few theoretical foundations to analyze the work in one. Like I said was using kind of organizational theory and literature which again that sort of morphed into networks and network theory but then yes that ultimately sort of compelled me to look at things from a social capital perspective and for people who are interested in social capital

again it's a very sort of amorphous concept that people have trouble kind of pinning down and identifying and I myself went through different iterations of understanding of what social capital is how do we even define the term or what this means. And I ended up relying on a definition from Mackie in Delhi who essentially said that social capital is a set of characteristics of a human organisation that encompasses the relations between individuals or groups the standards of social behaviour. The mutual reciprocity and how these things make action possible because they're based on a collaborative process. So I thought that that definition was particularly useful for me given that I was studying groups of people and understanding how and why collaboration in the informal sense works. They also hold a par three different aspects of social capital the structural relational and cognitive dimensions of social capital. So I was really able to look at things and look at the different items that I was analyzing along these lines. So to say things more in detail the structural aspect of social capital is the structure of the coalition itself and the greater network that it's involved in. Along with the presence of the relationships within that network including the strength and the stability of those relationships. There's also the relational dimension which is trying to understand how relationships are influenced by respect trust acceptance shared norms obligations commitment participation and diversity. And then lastly is the cognitive dimension which looks at the shared values the collective shared interest and I think most importantly the expectation of mutual reciprocity. So I felt that by breaking things down and borrowing from this definition this understanding of social capital that it gave me the most clear sense of how the mechanisms of social capital operate in a coalition in particular.

[00:16:40] I mean I can really see that particularly with the flexibility that's needed in thinking and behaving with people from other organisations in terms of that mutual reciprocity. So within the context what were some of your most interesting findings?

[00:16:57] I kind of broke things down into a few different categories of finding if you will. So the first was understanding how how these leaders define success. One of the things that came out of the original study that was particularly interesting was that regardless of the status of the coalition itself every single participant categorized their coalition as being at least somewhat successful. So nobody said that their coalition was a failure regardless of whether or not they actually achieve their goals or remained intact. And that is why we started to move toward understanding not so much failure but dissolution or dormancy because it may have been the case that that it wasn't intended to last long it wasn't intended to stay intact or that there were things that were successful even in instances where the Coalitions didn't achieve their primary goals. One of the most interesting findings was seeing how that understanding that multi-dimensional definition of success. If that had changed or not over time and how people were perceiving things now. So one thing that I found was like the original study although success is defined multi-dimensional achieving goals still remains the strongest predictor for those leaders and longevity remains the least important and meaning that just because the Coalition didn't last didn't mean that it was not successful. So that was one piece that kind of remained pretty pretty stable over time understanding success from a number of perspectives but ultimately that achieving goals is of primary importance in longevity is of the least important. The other sort of dimensions are possible definitions that had been identified in the original study were gaining recognition from the target raising consciousness in the community creating lasting networks. Having coalition members acquire new skills so those still were rated relatively high but the most important one the most significant one was in fact achieving a goal.

[00:19:03] How did those political economic and environmental factors play out?

[00:19:08] What I found was that in particular to my study in the coalition that geographically you know we're based in New York City that the relationships between the Coalition and the city and state level official were of the utmost importance. These were coalitions that were formed for the most part in the 80s. And so they were highly highly impacted by the New York City fiscal crisis of

the 70s and that for many in particular the ones that were not able to achieve their goals and did feel that there were a kind of political factors that influence that that the relationships with the mayors at the time a particular Mayor Koch a Mayor Giuliani that those relationships did play a large part in the challenges toward achieving their goals. Many participants also talked about the relationship with state level officials from assemblyman in particular and other legislators that ultimately that those relationships did affect and did didn't matter in terms of whether or not the Coalition was able to sort of persist and address the issues that they wanted to tackle. I also found that the federal political climate did have an effect on the Coalitions according to these leaders. But the effect was in the sense of how it. Impacted the social climate. So the things that were going on on a federal level and I'm sure this could be its own study in itself how those federal issues were sort of filtered through the media and presented to the general public created particular social climates in New York City which made things either particularly difficult or more conducive to the work that the Coalition was doing depending on how things were being sort of vocalized and perceived in the general community. So if you think about issues like HIV/AIDS and the AIDS crisis that was going on you know how people were talking about that as an issue did affect the ability of the coalition because there was absolutely you know in this case stigma involved and sort of targeting involved. If you look at that particular issue. So the all of the levels of sort of the political fiscal and social climate did matter. But it was those more localized relationships that seemed to have the most direct effect.

[00:21:33] What are the implications of your work to inform how current coalitions are operating today?

[00:21:41] I think that's a really important question. Some of the other findings that came out of my work was around the degree of. Structure or formality in the Coalition itself. One of the things that I found was that the more structured the coalition is the more chances they have are the more opportunities they have to achieve their goals and to persist over time if that is their desire including you know institutionalizing as I called it the relationship between a particular organization and the coalition itself. What I mean by that is that oftentimes when organizations are participating in coalitions it's usually not something that is sort of written into that organization's work or a particular person's job description. So it seems like what happens often is there somebody at a particular organization who says hey you know did you hear about this coalition. I think this is something that our organization should be involved in and goes and participates in it and. Probably does a great job. But when that person leaves then that relationship between that organization and that coalition is no longer there. And so one of the things that I found is that those that institutionalized that relationship when organizations institutionalized their relationship to a coalition and almost codified it that it increased the chances of achieving goals. And there's a lot of reasons for that including sort of the commitment level that might be demonstrated if it is more of a formal expectation but also then that the research the other resources get diverted toward that coalition that may not be there. I heard a lot of people say that they that money didn't matter that their coalition didn't have any money and they still did well but overall money did matter. And coalitions do need funding to persist over time if that is their goal another sort of interesting thing that I found was around diversity in that people for the most sense seem to value diversity but had a really difficult time making that happen. And along those lines people seemed to value a egalitarian and consensus based decision making process. But overall that were able to persist over time had a more top down structure and had less sort of community participation. So I think that's a really sort of interesting finding that probably needs further examination. But I think that as we think about the current state of things and what it means we have to recognize that for social change issues that Federal Resources are less and less as it is right now as time goes on and that those resources that might be allocated for social change coalitions probably aren't going to be as available. Simultaneously there are increased mandates for coalition and collaboration in general from the federal level and also from the state level. So as we look at these different social issues and we see

this in particular with many health related issues that. Funders and particular public funders but also private funders are mandating that people collaborate across disciplines and across fields. And I think that's that's actually fantastic. But a lot of times the resources and the funding are contingent upon that collaboration. So I think that we have to recognize now that some of the resources in those sort of tangible resources are not going to be there. And I think that it's important to find other ways to formalize these coalitions and formalize these relationships outside of money essentially and finding opportunities for people from organizations to participate in coalitions in a way that isn't just sort of ad hoc you know it isn't like oh this is something that I do because I like it and my boss said it's OK that it's actually written into job description and it's on my spare time.

[00:25:49] So I want to circle back to to that point because I think that you mentioned early on some of your work is based on organizational theory, right? And connect that to the innovative ways that coalitions do their work. Could you say a little bit more then about your future work and where you see this going?

[00:26:11] I think in general a lot of the success of sort of future coalitions and collaboration is dependent on its leadership. That was another kind of important finding that leaders really matter obviously but also that they act sort of as lynchpins for all of these other different predictors that influence the success of a coalition. And ultimately that effective leaders need to be both transactional and transformative so they need to be keeping an eye on sort of the day to day activity and tasks based stuff but also be driving coalitions toward their vision toward their mission and transforming their coalitions. As time goes on too to adapt to the environment to adapt to changing needs of the community. So I think that you know at this point in time we really need to pay attention to leaders and leaders need to know that if they are embarking on safe forming a coalition or leading a coalition that they certainly have the dedicated time to do that and that in these instances where you know they want to involve people from organizations who don't have the time who don't have the resources that they are creating opportunities for flexible but meaningful participation because people need to feel like they're making a difference and that's kind of part of the social capital aspect as well that people who are involved need to feel like their presence matters that they're making a difference that they have a role and responsibility and a commitment to the coalition. And I think it's ultimately up to the coalition leaders to facilitate these relationships where people can exercise their power in coalitions and enact their power and coalitions but in ways that work for them in ways that are flexible in ways that serve their organization's needs. In addition to the Coalitions needs people need to feel like they in their organization are getting something out of it. And I think that a lot of that lies in the hands of the leaders. Altruistic aims only go so far when the day to day operations have to continue on.

[00:28:17] So given that what's next for you?

[00:28:20] I am currently the program director, like I said from the Arthur project which is a new non-profit in New York City and I actually took a step away from teaching to be involved in this. And the reason I was sort of willing to do that and excited about doing that is the Arthur project is providing intensive mentoring services to quote at risk middle school students right now in the South Bronx which is actually close to home for me. So that's one reason that I was excited about it but really the other reason is that the goal of our mentoring program and the unique structure and relationship of our program is that we want to improve the social and economic mobility of the young people that we are going to be serving. And we're going to do that by helping our young people create personal and professional networks through which they can get real experiences both sort of life experiences cultural experience but also job based and academic based experiences that are ultimately going to improve their chances of having those opportunities later in life even though they are middle school students. Now we really want to help them create a professional network that they can tap into throughout their whole life through high school college or or career and

beyond. So there absolutely is an aspect of this social capital and network piece that I feel really excited about and that I'm hoping to see kind of play out in real life as we roll out our program.

[00:29:54] So that's very exciting to see how that goes. Thank you very very much for sharing your story with us.

[00:29:59] Thank you.

[00:30:00] Best of luck with the research. It's very exciting. Thanks.

[00:30:03] You've been listening to Dr. Jessica Greenawalt discuss her research on predicting Coalition's success and failure in social work.

[00:30:20] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at [www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu](http://www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu). And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.