

## **inSocialWork Podcast Series**

### **Episode 47 - Dr. Caitlin Ryan: Commitment, Intentionality, and Hard Work: What It Takes To Do Culturally Competent, Ground-Breaking Research**

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to tell you about a new feature of living proof. In addition to listening subscribing to and sharing podcasts you can now rate and write a review of each episode of living proof to rate or write a review of podcasts. Just go to our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast) and click on to create your own review button. We look forward to hearing from you. Dr. Caitlin Ryan is a clinical social worker and director of the Marian Wright Edelman Institute at San Francisco State University. Dr. Ryan is a founder and past president of the National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation and founder of the National Association of People With AIDS. She has developed community based AIDS services and conducted groundbreaking research on lesbian health and mental health needs and concerns. As director of the Family Acceptance Project at the Marian Wright Edelman Institute she has studied how family acceptance and rejection affect the health mental health and wellbeing of lesbian gay bisexual and transgender youth. Dr. Ryan has written numerous articles monographs and reports including coauthoring the first book on AIDS policy AIDS a public health challenge which serves as the basis for many of the recommendations of the first Presidential Commission on AIDS.

[00:01:57] Her most recent coauthored book serving LGBT youth in out-of-home care provides the first policy and practice guidelines to improve services for LGBT youth in child welfare juvenile justice and transitional living programs. Dr. Ryan's work has been acknowledged by many professional and community groups for contributions to lesbian gay bisexual and transgender health has spanned 35 years through community development advocacy policy and research. In this episode of living through Dr. Ryan discusses the challenges of breaking ground in new areas of research especially work that may be considered controversial and what it takes to do a work that is culturally and linguistically appropriate. The conversation ends with advice for those who would like to follow similar lines of research. Dr. Diane Elze associate professor and director of the MSW program at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with Dr. Ryan by telephone. I'm Diane Elze from the University at Buffalo School of Social Work and I will be talking today with Dr. Caitlin Ryan Dr. Ryan. Thank you so much for your willingness to be interviewed. Well Diane I'm thrilled to be asked actually. And indeed it's an honor to be interviewed by you. I so appreciate the leadership that you've provided especially in social work education which is one area where we really need to get this information out. Yes. So thank you. I am impressed by the cultural diversity of the participants in your study in both phases of your study in the interviews that you've done and in the surveys that you've done and then also in the intervention research that you are embarking upon it sounds like you are your study is really reaching out to Latino families to Chinese families.

[00:03:56] Could you talk about what it's been like for you and your team to really be committed to recruiting culturally diverse participants. I think that's something that has to be a priority from the very beginning. I think that a lot of times people start a research project or a program and they know that they want to provide a service but they haven't really thought through who they want to serve and who do they want to reach and how to include them. I think that's part of the reason why so many of the studies that have been done on end up with a very small proportion of people who are not white people of color multi-ethnic folks. And our work has always been characterized by looking at culture ethnicity experiences diversity in every aspect of the work and not only did we do the qualitative and quantitative survey but we also did after that very exciting briefing sessions where we took the research back to many of the families in the original qualitative study and then

we expanded to include very diverse families with young people you know children adolescents young adults from different age groups so they have included African-American white latino API Chinese and Native American. And we did that work in three languages to share the findings with families. We documented the reactions both pre and post them to the three month interview. Out after that initial briefing session but we heard how they responded to the findings.

[00:05:31] And so what in essence happened was the families helped us message the research findings that families helped us interpret them they helped us understand what would be helpful for them and other families like them from their backgrounds in terms of motivating behavioral change and supporting and supporting their children in a different sort of way than they'd already been interacting with them. What kinds of materials were needed how best to present that information. So in developing our materials those briefing sessions were extraordinarily useful but they also really helped us in figuring out how to do the interventions how to think about providing outreach materials. We also did a similar briefing sessions with providers ethnically diverse. And then we started doing them earlier this year with youth. These are all resource issues are going to underscore one big word for what does it really take. It's a real resource issue. So from the very beginning if you want to include ethnically diverse groups in your work it's a matter of committing resources and committing them from the very beginning you have to plan this in your budget. I planned this with great intentionality because I wanted to be sure that not only could we help families in the U.S. but really help them around the world because part of what I want to do is to help. And I've been doing this with groups from other countries in disseminating our work to create an international movement of family support and promoting wellness and well-being for LGBT young people. One aspect of globalization of course is that we can communicate about these issues through the Internet across the world. And this is actually having an impact on sexual behavior on attitudes on identities across nationally internationally. And so I decided earlier when I was getting ready to plan the interventions which I've actually been planning for a long time. But I wanted to pick the three largest thing which is in the world.

[00:07:33] From my perspective those were English Spanish and Chinese. So when we decided to do the interventions I knew that I needed those language experiences I needed the lived experience in native level fluency and understanding and all of that and I made a resource commitment. But when I say a resource commitment I'm not just talking about adding that to the budget if to move the money around in your budget to figure out you know if you're going to add skill old master's level practitioners who really could have the ability to work with families. That means that other parts of the budget you know have to be lowered as well and it takes a lot to do this work. And the reason I've done it I think over all of these years is that I've been willing to make a commitment myself. So I've never really made an adult salary and I laugh when I talk about that. But my commitment is to the work. And so I think so many times people are more concerned about is this something that's going to fit into what I'm already doing rather than the resources have to be allocated and prioritize from day one. And and having worked with so many diverse families I knew that we could have an impact on that. In fact many Chinese people had said to us oh Chinese families will never come forward. I've been a community organizer since the 1960s so I know that if you provide services in a way that's respectful linguistically and culturally appropriate and available people will use them if they need them and we knew that.

[00:09:07] And you know in our community in the Bay area there are many Chinese speaking young people in fact that's the third you know about a third of the kids in school speak Cantonese. So in thinking about this we created a collaboration with one of the big Chinese settlement health agencies in the community did a lot of outreach announced our collaboration in all of the Chinese newspapers and Chinese media and lots of people were saying oh you know families will never come and what we found was that after we did this level of outreach we immediately had 70 families that called Chinese speaking with lesbian or gay children. And the last was a family with a

7 year old transgender child that was Zeri in great distress and didn't know where to turn. So it's a question of resources. It's a question of intentionality and it's also a question of not just paying lip service but getting the highest quality that you can get. You really need native level language and cultural experience in order to present the most effective ways and throughout the course of my life I've lived outside the U.S. periodically I spent quite a lot of time in Asia for example and part of that included doing research Fulbright scholar on AIDS in South Korea and I learned a great deal about how to do this appropriately but also to do it in a way that people can hear it. And I guess that's probably the best way to answer your question. I want to come back to the recruitment of transgender youth. But before we leave that area of financial resources I do want to ask you Dr. Ryan what is it like for you to secure funding for your project.

[00:11:02] This is a huge project. It's been going on now for seven years I believe and we know that conducting intervention research the way that you're conducting it is also very costly. It's so important but it's also very costly. So what is the funding like for you. Well I have to laugh because you know I'd have to say that I never have enough funding and in fact the entire project is supported by foundations and a small number of donors. We've been fortunate to have had mainstream funders like the California Endowment that made a major commitment at the beginning to support the research and had they not done that we would never have had this amazing research to use for all different kinds of things. We've had other funders since then particularly because our work has a lot of salience for on a farm near so you can see similar programs. And most recently the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that gave us a matching grant to develop these interventions. But even so it really isn't enough. And these are tough times. You know to be raising funds. So I don't really have a job I am I live completely on soft money so my team is small. It's very intentional. I'm very frugal. We actually shopped at the dollar store for our advisory committee meetings. You know and we've learned how to do this over the years in a very very frugal way. But we are tax deductible through San Francisco State.

[00:12:39] And I'm hoping over time to increase our donor base particularly in these very very challenging times when some of our foundations of actually had to cut back and the level of funding that has you know they've been able to make available. I think you always have to be creative Diane you can't ever take anything for granted and I'd spend about four hours out of every day even the weekends working on fundraising. Be it writing thank you letters to donors or trying to find new sources of funding. I think one of the biggest problems because I've always worked in areas that have never been done before. Did the first work in defining lesbian health and planning that in 1979 were early work in the AIDS epidemic or early work and was being health in the 1970s. It was always so hard to talk people into funding something that they couldn't envision and it still is very very challenging. Even though I think this work has extraordinary promise particularly for jurisdictions our research has shown dramatic impacts that families are rejecting families have an increasing risk for suicide substance abuse or the depression. So if you think about the cost of homelessness or career mental health or HIV infection or the lost tax base from people who die at a very early age of suicide it really costs our communities. One of the things I want to do although I haven't had time is to do a cost benefit analysis to show jurisdictions that by doing early intervention and doing family work at an early stage we can save you know so many millions of dollars that could be otherwise applied. That's a little bit of a tangent but I think what I'm talking about is the cost effectiveness of helping families do something that they do by instinct which is to love their children.

[00:14:33] So in essence one day I was talking with a parent and it just sort of came out. But in these days of H1N1 I just said to her you know think about these supportive behaviors as inoculating the child with love because that's really in essence we're doing so are interventions are very cost effective. They're very close to the ground. They're about as close to the ground as you can get. Because we're working with family units and the other really exciting thing about them and

we found this when we did a special session at the International AIDS Conference in Mexico City is that they can really be done all over the world and so there are a lot of countries that are following us and are very excited about using whatever it is that we're developing in their own communities. That's very powerful and I think your research also of course gives hope people I mean families change around all kinds of issues. And so why would couldn't they change around this issue as well. Well you know Singer I think on one of the most important aspects of what we're doing which is hope and in fact you know all the work I've ever done this is the most hopeful and inspiring. And you know if we had three weeks of taping this interview I could tell you the most moving stories of families and you know really meager and all different kinds of circumstances figuring out how to help that LGBT child and families that people would never expect. In fact one of the things that I've been doing and this is another place where I actually really need the fundraising.

[00:16:16] People probably don't know that I have a background in art and music and that's how I survived adolescence but before I started doing this kind of work I actually was an artist and a musician and was a professional photographer and you know did a lot of other things in my young years you know in my teens and early 20s. And so one of the things that I've seen is the profound need because there really aren't services for families of color to find one another. The profound need to give them hope and to give youth hope. So with a friend of mine who's a Peabody Award winning documentary filmmaker we've been making these beautiful video stories that actually reflect the rejecting and accepting behaviors in our research and are the stories of ethnically socially and religiously diverse families that are actually using them in the interventions and were using them for training and eventually when I do an online seat you see a me course I'll use these videos as part of the training that we include to help providers identify opportunities for intervention as well as the outcomes of really helping families support their children. But there are so many ways I think that because we have first of all such amazing data and these are the stories of families through their own words many many ways that we can use the arts. If we had the funding to do that can we return for a moment to the issue of transgender youth and were there any unique challenges you faced in recruiting transgender young people for your study transgender young people and their families for your intervention. Yes there are. There were and there are we were.

[00:18:17] We did the qualitative the first qualitative part of our study some time ago and there were fewer transgender young people who were out and fewer families that were willing to be interviewed. We found that many families with transgender youth who transition want they want to leave the past behind. So they don't want the story of that to be available. They really want to move with their child as their child transitions and live with that young person in that current identity. So I think were some recruitment challenges but I think in terms of the whole concept of the word transgender it's a very broad term transgender identities have really expanded over the last decade. So broad that I'm not really sure how useful it is except if people self identify of course that's how they identify. And we need to respect that. But the other aspect that I really have seen it's very important is that how a person's gender expression is perceived by others and how they react to that gender expression is a huge issue in terms of being in the world and many people are gender variant which means they don't match cultural or personal definitions of how men or women are expected to look act or behave. But not all of them identify as transgender. In fact I have to go back and second what a very high proportion of LGBT young adults are studying their parents and family members had tried to change their gender expression. So in other words they tried to pressure them to conform with cultural and societal expectations of gender.

[00:20:08] And we know that some cultures have more latitude or room for less traditionally masculine males are more masculine females have more latitude in mainstream culture for girls to be androgynous. But we know women get to high school girls are expected to be more feminine so there's more pressure to conform on many people who were gender variant and who were pressured by their parents to conform to their expectations. Didn't identify as transgender yet they still had

higher levels of negative outcomes than young people who were not pressured by their parents to conform to gender expression. So I think that perception and reaction related to gender expression are tiers of well-being for young people more than any self label. And I think that's a really important issue to think about in all of this. So perhaps last but not least you've been a national leader in LGBT research for many years. And so what advice would you give to new researchers who were interested in pursuing LGBT research as the focus for their career. Well you know I can definitely give advice on this although you know I'm not sure to what extent people want to hear it because I think that first of all you have to get the very best training you can get. And that may involve sacrifice in terms of the amount of work that's done and where there are resources that have to be applied. I've heard from many students both master's level and doctoral level who want to develop their own curricula. They want to go to schools let them design their curricula. They're very clear.

[00:21:55] They just want to work with LGBT populations and these are the courses that they want to take in class and I think these self designed courses are typically not well designed and students don't get the rigorous training they get from studying in more traditional academic programs that teach them the nuts and bolts of research theory and critical thinking. There really aren't any shortcuts to learning how to do this work. My advice is find the most rigorous program you can get in and learn the basics. You can also study sexuality and LGBT issues and you can learn more of that later. Once you get out of a program you study whatever you want. But getting those basic skills of critical thinking in research methods and really thinking about these issues even basic developmental you know high high quality developmental courses very important. Another important thing is to find a mentor who will help you learn and you have to really be willing to work hard. So that may involve volunteering to work on a team doing things that you may think are not important like Xeroxing or you know helping set up meetings. I'm from an immigrant family and many of our teams actually if I come to think about it I think our original team are all immigrants and I find that I don't think they want to hear this but many students and young practitioners you know are reluctant to work hard. And many of them are you know they're looking or thinking being concerned about you know when will when is this when can I leave or when is it over and doing work that's never been done before which is incredibly rewarding on many levels. Takes an enormous amount of hard work.

[00:23:42] Woody Allen says that much of life is showing up just boom there but I would argue that the rest of it is hard work. And I think if you want to chart these incredibly rich on explored very important avenues it really requires working very very hard to do that not only just to get the education but also to think through develop the networks the relationships the venues that will enable you to do something that will really make a difference. Great. OK. Well I want to thank you so much for all the time you gave to this interview and the energy that you expended. And I want to thank you so very much for your research and your advocacy over the years. On behalf of LGBT people it's been a pleasure to be on this call and to get to have women actually never had a conversation like this. So it's very exciting and I hope before too long to really show you what we're actually doing. You've been listening to Dr. Caitlin Ryan discuss the challenges of conducting culturally competent and pioneering research. Look for Episode 33 in which Dr. Ryan discusses her work on the Family Acceptance Project. Thanks for listening. And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). At UB we're living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.