

Episode 81 - Jessica Greenawalt: Using Social Capital to Achieve Goals in a Low-Income, Immigrant Community

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at 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 address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed the living proof podcast as evidenced by the more than 150000 downloads to date thanks to all of you. We'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcasts in their classrooms. Just go to our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you today's guest is Jessica Greenawalt. Ms Greenawalt is a Ph.D. student at Boston University's School of Social Work. Her research interests include participatory action research community organizing and legislative advocacy. In this podcast Ms Greenawalt discusses her work with the Chelsea Collaborative in Chelsea Massachusetts. Chelsea is a city right outside of Boston. It has a high percentage of immigrants and a high poverty rate. It also has the Chelsea Collaborative a nonprofit organization that over the past 20 years has provided services to the community and community organizing to meet its own needs.

[00:02:07] Ms Greenawalt worked with the Collaborative on its social capital campaign which is an effort to build the social capital of the community using a political economy approach. Ms. Greenawalt discusses some of the outcomes of her work and the role of participatory action research in supporting the communities self determination. Dr. Kathleen Kost associate professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with Ms. Greenawalt by telephone. I'm Kathleen Kost associate professor at the University of Buffalo School Social Work Here with me to talk about social capital and push for involvement in participatory action research in Chelsea Massachusetts. Is Jessica Greenawalt thanks so much for joining us today. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how you got involved in this project and who all is participating in this project. I was invited in as Ph.D. student at Boston University. My advisor and mentor Lee Staples had been working with this organization the Chelsea Collaborative and they had already initiated social capital campaign and I along with these staples were invited in as steering committee members to help guide the next phase of the social capital campaign. Exciting. What exactly is your social capital campaign which involved in that.

[00:03:45] Well the organization that we're working with the Telsey collaborative use this term themselves and defined this campaign themselves their initial part of the campaign phase one of their social capital campaign is they identified it was really to go out into their community and find out what kind of relationships people had with their neighbors with the police with politicians and so they developed a questionnaire went out into the neighborhoods did some door knocking and started asking people how they felt about their relationships with these various people these various actors and what they found was that people did have a very high level of trust which is one indicator of social capital with their neighbors but that they really had a low level of trust with different people sort of outside their immediate circle. So people who lived in other areas of the community the police different politicians there was less trust less established relationship with these sort of outside folks as compared to the people who were right in their own circle of friends or in their own neighborhood. So the second phase of their social capital campaign was really to find out and pick a plan of action to develop better relationships develop more trust with these other folks. Social capital is such an important resource and in communities particularly communities of color and communities that are resource poor just because it is very difficult for those types of communities to

have linkages. Should bridges really to the larger community to draw down resources. What was the makeup or what was special about Chelsea that brought this group to that community to work on this. What was going on there. Chelsea is an interesting community it's thriving in many ways despite its high immigrant population. Almost half of the population is Latino. The poverty rate is extremely high in Chelsea it's 21 percent as opposed to just under 7 percent compared to the rest of the state.

[00:06:03] So the community was in sort of a situation where they wanted to improve their standing but really were motivated to do so and they really saw these relationships both the bonding relationships between each other and the bridging relationships with these other folks that we've been talking about as a really vital component into improving their status. We know that when social capital improves in all communities we see a lot of other positive outcomes as well. So we were taking what's called a political economy approach meaning we wanted the development of social capital to result in tangible benefits in political participation and social participation civic engagement. So that the social capital was felt on a very real level. So your primary goal was then how would you capsulize that as your primary goal. Social capital Well I mean were you hoping to empower the community to have to draw more resources to it to improve employment. What was what was one of the some of the goals for even beginning the project. I mean why choose social capital evolve. Well again you know this was really driven by the community itself and they recognized and realized that social capital or the development of it was really a vehicle toward these more positive outcomes. What they really cared about most and what they found from their initial phase of the campaign is that people were really concerned about crime and safety in their neighborhoods along with a lack of political or civic engagement. So they really saw the development of social capital as a way to become more politically involved and to truly have more power in their own community to make some changes where they saw fit. Very exciting. It's like the chicken or the egg. Very often we move to the chicken from just above the big angry fish who wasn't involved in the Chelsea Collaborative.

[00:08:20] Well the Chelsea Collaborative itself is a community organization made up mostly of Spanish speaking folks some who are immigrants some who are not and really has a number of different committees within the organization to deal with whatever issues they are targeting. I was brought in and Lee was brought in specifically for this one committee the Social Capital Committee. And so group that made up the social capital committee was concerned individuals who really wanted to be a part of developing social capital for this group. Where are you now or are you still collecting data on this or do you actually have some results that you could talk a little bit about. Well we are still collecting data excitingly what happened in this process was sort of an organic result. You could say that as we were going through the process of the social capital campaign people became very excited about the research aspect of it and sort of we took a kind of tangent off of the original plan and developed a participatory action research group where individuals who are already part of the social capital campaign and some who were not were organized and brought in to be trained in basic research methods so that they could continue on and conduct their own research develop their own research or research questions analyze their own data decide how that information was going to be disseminated. And so this kind of slow the process a little bit for the social capital campaign itself but was an exciting development in itself. How do you think that changed the direction or the content of the research the kinds of questions that were asked.

[00:10:14] Using that as a method I think that moving forward what it's going to do for this organization is allow these community members to really ask and analyze questions that are truly relevant to their own needs and wants. And it's not going to be directed by sort of the desires of you know a funding source or academic institution. They can really choose and direct their own research and hopefully make it you know as relevant and as applicable as possible to the work that they're doing on a daily basis. In some ways it's just much more relevant and applied than what. Maybe an

academic or a Ph.D. student might ordinarily do you feel at home when we give up control. So that makes it more exciting though. That's for sure. It's just you know especially because the real highlight I think the most exciting part of participatory action research is that it's it really is driven by the people doing it and truly they are the experts in their own lives and should have all the information and the power to do what they want with that information. And this is a way to do it. And that's very exciting. You know even if it doesn't mean losing some some control that you should show it to a certain extent though it doesn't sound like you have had to sacrifice those sort of fundamental issues of reliability and validity in here. It's been more about bringing people together and watching them and the community grow that ultimately. Yes exactly. So how have you seen the community change.

[00:12:08] You know we've seen a little bit one of the major artists to say this is not a little that this is sort of one of the major developments that the the way that the community itself saw the saw best to develop social capital was to establish these neighborhood associations which were called the seniors who Nietos or United Neighbors. And this was a way for people to both get to know one another in their own neighborhoods and started developing relationships with maybe some some outside folks that were not they're living right there or connected to those neighborhoods. So the town of Chelsea was split up into precincts the police precinct and these were the same boundaries that were drawn to develop neighborhood associations. When I left Chelsea there were two neighborhood associations in development and these were usually monthly meetings that were held and organized by community members but various politicians and other law enforcement officials were invited in and did attend these meetings. And you started to develop relationships. People were able to voice their concerns as constituents of these politicians. They were able to discuss some of the things that they were seeing on a daily basis and the politicians and the law enforcement officials really were held accountable for some of the complaints that were being voiced. So it really provided a forum for people to both voice their opinion and put their concerns into action to develop a plan to sort of counter some of the things that they were seeing especially the crime and safety issues. So that was one of the major things that grew out of it was the development of these neighborhood associations and what we are seeing as these are growing is that membership in the organization is improving voting registration is going up civic engagement and participation is going up. So we are seeing some of the positive outcomes that we expected with the development of these associations.

[00:14:18] But a very powerful model. I'm wondering do you have any intention or thoughts about replicating it in other kinds of communities. Maybe ones that do not have high immigrant populations but are yet very poor. That's an interesting question. You know we're finding and we know that social capital operates very differently in affluent communities versus low income or in communities of color versus predominantly white communities. So it is a good question to ask sort of how is this model going to work in a slightly different or very different community and I'm sure that it will work differently. We haven't discussed concretely because this was so focused. I mean we were really just invited into Chelsea in particular. That was how this all got started. I think that once the final neighborhood association there should be four. By the time it's complete once those all four are sort of up and running and we can get a little bit more long term data on the process and outcome of these associations then we'll start to look at where can this be done. Where else can this be done. I wonder for listeners if you could say a little bit more about how social capital operates differently and in those communities that you identify to see the wealthy versus poor high proportion of people of color versus predominantly white. Social capital can be a tricky thing to talk about.

[00:15:46] There's so many different understanding is a hard thing to pin down but really the way we're looking at it is through this understanding of bonding and bridging bonding being the aspect of social capital that is within a group the trust and norms that operate within a group and that

enforce reciprocity within a group. The other aspect that we're dealing with is the bridging aspect of social capital. So how does one group connect to another and what is the bridge across the divides that might keep two groups apart. Those divides could be racial or socioeconomic it could be a number of things. So we're really concerned about these two things. What brings a group together and holds it together and what connects groups to one another so that they can really continue to reap benefits on a on a larger scale. And what we've found is that in predominantly white community or a community of high socioeconomic status that people and groups are really able to reap the benefits of social capital quite easily that the bonding happens almost automatically and that the bridging is really almost assumed or natural step so that we see that in a predominantly white community. Not only are they coming together but that they're very easily able to tap into outside resources or outside groups to reap the benefits. That sounds great for those communities. But on the flip side what we've found in communities of color or in low income communities is that the bonding oftentimes as we saw here in Chelsea is in place people are with one another they trust one another they have relationships. They have a desire to do more and to have more and to be more active. But oftentimes those efforts to bridge as we say are really thwarted by these outside groups. And there are a number of reasons why that might be the case.

[00:17:45] But really that's what we're finding is that the trust and the reciprocity is there with the group that it is very difficult to bridge and to sort of reap the rewards of that bridging even more so in a community that might have a high number of undocumented immigrants. The effort to bridge is even riskier as you can imagine especially in terms of you know finding work or being politically involved that can be a dangerous endeavor for somebody who is not necessarily documented to live in the United States. So you can see how this operates much differently depending on the community. Given its outcome what do you think that was so positive in Chelsea what do you think was sort of the special seeing what is this collaborative habit that helped to launch this sort of flustered this amazing success. That's a good question. That's a very sad one. Well you know I think one thing is that this organization has been around for about 25 years. It's taken sort of different forms over that time but in itself has really gained you know a lot of organizational mileage. It has a lot of credibility in the community and wider the executive director of the Chelsea Collaborative Gladys Vega is a very prominent figure in Chelsea and in the Boston area in general and her you know connections and her abilities her strength alone. I think really bring a lot to the group and then the group is they are sort of ready to go any time. So it's an organization that's been around for a long time that has a lot of credibility.

[00:19:36] I also think the history of sort of race relations in the Boston area was was impetus for law enforcement officials and politicians to sort of show that you know they wanted to create a new relationship with people. So I think that they you know from all sides people were kind of eager to sort of change the relationships that were within the community. So you had willingness but you also had a history of trust and respect and mutual respect which was again all germane to social capital and creating strong social networks. We said Yeah. BARRY Chu what sparked your interest in this. I have been into community organizing for a little while now. I did some organizing myself in California working in the Central Valley where most of the farming takes place for a lot of our country actually a number of communities along the Central Valley of California that are home to a huge number of mostly undocumented immigrants who do most of the farm work. I worked with the Dolores Huerta Foundation to do some organizing for a number of issues in California. So that was kind of how I got my feet wet once I got to Boston and was in school in Boston working with me Staples who he has been part of the Chelsea Collaborative for a number of years now and he and I sort of started talking and voicing you know my desire to learn more and do more to develop social capital. And it was then that he went to the group and told them about me and they invited me to come in and be sort of you know a committee member. Very very exciting they say. So what's next for you then. When you said that this was sounded like the side of the project was done.

[00:21:34] It seems like it is. I think that I may be asked to come back to sort of renew the participatory action research training either to follow up with the group that already was that we already trained or to train a new group or to just sort of consult on it so that could happen in the future. But really my work there was to help get these neighborhood associations going and to sort of analyze the process. And then we jumped off into this participatory action research piece and that was completed for the time being so I may be asked to come back for that or to do further evaluation work on the campaign. But officially right now I'm not I'm not as involved as I was at the time also because I live in New York City now so make sure to make those meetings. I would think so. I don't know. So what are you working on now. Well personally I'm working on my own research which is focusing on social justice coalitions in New York City. I'm working with Mizrahi who is a Professor Hunter College a little over 20 years ago she did a huge exploratory study of social justice coalitions in New York City and got a lot of great information. And so I'm going to do a follow up study sort of a longitudinal study to see which of these coalitions have persisted and succeeded over this time.

[00:23:03] And then I'm also going to apply the social capital piece to it and sort of look at how the social capital of the individual members the organizations and the Coalitions influence their successes their ability to sustain over 20 plus years and say What do you think social workers could learn or practice based on the work that you're doing with social capital and working with community groups. So often are these are students want to move into no more direct practice rather than community organizing and you've built your career really around sounds like community organizing and developing social capital. What are some of the takeaways for you. For students who are either interested in doing research in this area or in practicing and in doing community organizing. I know people go into this field sometimes to do direct work other times not. And I think all are great. I think that the important thing to remember is you know it sounds so cliché but this whole person and environment thing and that is what social capital is about. So if a student or whomever chooses to go into direct practice or clinical work really I think the takeaway is to not forget how important relationships the environment the larger society influence that person. And you know you might not necessarily as a clinician go out and start doing community organizing but I think it is the responsibility of every social worker to remember the social justice piece and to do what they can to affect the person the person's environment that they are working with. And that's really yet it might not take a huge sort of tangible form but really just keeping that in mind that in order to effect that person you really need to affect their environment and to learn about their relationships within that environment. Certainly the work that you did with the Chelsea Collaborative suggests amazing impact really.

[00:25:11] Lots of depths and breaths to the impact on the environment. For residents there and just a change in the relationship with the police I think is incredible. Yeah. Well thank you very very much. Is there anything else you'd like to add. No I think that's it. I think they're wonderful. Thank you so much. Thank you, I had a great time this is fantastic. You thing listening to Jessica Greenawalt discuss the social capital campaign and Chelsea Massachusetts. 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 and 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. At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.