Collab Chats E.4- Welcoming Spaces with Dr. Gretchen Snethen

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Kyra: Welcome to Collab Chats, I'm your host, Kyra Baker.

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Today I'm talking with D r. Gretchen Snethen. She's an associate professor in the Recreation Therapy program at Temple University, and the associate director for the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion. Her professional experience consists of direct and managerial work with youth and adults with mental illnesses. Her research focuses on understanding the relationship between environmental factors and community participation, using the community to promote physical activity engagement, and developing interventions that you recreation and leisure as a means to promote independence in the community. Gretchen's joining us today to talk about one of the Collaborative's research projects, called the Welcoming Spaces. Welcome, Gretchen. Thank you for being here.

0:55:618

Gretchen: Happy to be here, Kyra.

0:56:812

Kyra: We're happy to have you. So, you were the principal investigator for the Welcoming Spaces project. How did this project come to you, and how has your relationship with it changed?

1:06:691

Gretchen: So… when we develop projects for the research collaborative, we have multiple giant brainstorming sessions where we think about all of the different projects that we want to do, and you know, we usually start with twenty or more ideas, and we narrow everything down to like seven. So it's really this process of figuring out a good mix of intervention projects, but then some of these more basic science projects where we can look at factors that influence community participation. Our mission is really promoting "community participation just like everyone else," and there's quite a bit of research looking at why people don't participate, and we've done research that says people would like to participate more, but what we hadn't done, and what I think was really missing from the existing literature, is trying to understand, one, where people are going in their communities, but also what it is about those spaces where they might feel welcome. Because if you don't have a space where you feel welcomed, you're probably not going to go and participate in the community. So that was really where this came from, this project wasn't initially my idea, but it evolved with some of the primary investigators that were on it. I worked a lot with Jeff Drain in developing this project, and we worked collaboratively on it. And so as my role shifted into more of a lead, it was fun sort of getting his input and helping shape it, and then really watching it take off.

2:33:208

Kyra: So the primary purpose of project was to really understand what places in the community people with serious mental illnesses feel welcome from their perspectives?

2:43.428

Gretchen: Yes.

2:44:266

Kyra: So, how did you develop the process for gathering this data? How did you choose what questions to ask research participants?

2:52:480

Gretchen: It's interesting because you think places where you go on a day to day basis. You know, I… well, right now I don't go a lot of places, I come to work, but when I was living in the city and going to some of these other places… You know you think about where you feel comfortable. And it's kind of… abstract? Because you don't necessarily think while you're in the space "do I feel welcomed here?" um and "what is it about the space that really makes me feel welcomed? am I drawn because of certain reasons?" So, we had to take a step back, and think about from our own experiences, what is it about spaces that draw you in or make you feel welcomed. But then, it's not enough just to think about our own perspectives, but we wanted to really get the input from individuals with lived experiences to try to understand what those factors are. So, we went through a lot of different iterations of what this interview might look like, and then we talked with some of our advisory board, who are people with lived experiences, and then we also dug into the literature to see kind of what have been there, and then we held some discussion groups at some local mental health centers to get their input and hear how they would talk about different spaces and what factors mattered to them. And that really helped us shape the interview.

4:08:125

Kyra: Yeah. With the literature that you had dug into before starting this, what was that focused on, how did…does this differ…

4.12.204

Gretchen: (crosstalk) well…

4.12.204

Kyra: From that?

4.14.596

Gretchen: …it was interesting because it was a… a whole area of literature that's not really what I do. You know with my background as a recreational therapist, a lot of my work looks at intervention research and activity in areas that might prevent community participation, or things that as a practitioner or provider, we should address to help support people to engage in the community. So I was digging in to literature that was vastly different, I was looking at architecture-related literature. We were very creative in how we were trying to find information. And what we found, there was some information looking at mental health facilities, so what is it about environmental features, health environments that are optimal, and this is actually pretty

consistent with general population and medical facilities. You know, if you go into hospitals you'll start to see that there's more windows, because natural light is important for reducing stress and decreasing the length of stay within a hospital. What we found in mental health facilities, it was related to reduced aggression, and again that reduced stress levels - having either access to natural environments or even just having plants in the spaces where you're receiving treatment, was important. You know, not having too much overhead light, which can overbearing and stress in and of itself… we found things that talked about having modular furniture, so that it could be adapted to sort of whatever the social environment was happening in the moment. So you could move things around, so you could have a conversation or you can set things up so you could sort of be by yourself or around people without being overwhelmed by the stuff in the space.

So those were some of the things that we were finding from the medical architecture, or the Health and Place kind of literature, and then we looked at… Greg Townley has some stuff that looks at neighborhoods and what people identify as welcoming or important in their own neighborhoods, and that was from the perspectives of individuals with mental illnesses, so that was something we tried to draw in. And then there was some literature that looked at libraries among college students, and what features they looked for. We cast a really wide net. And then we talked to people. And from our early discussions there was conversations about spaces within the movie theater that were welcoming, and the activity of a movie was welcoming because you could go and have this common experience around people, and then you could talk about it because you all just had this common experience. But it was also dark, it was a comfortable temperature, there were these things that were helpful in making it enjoyable without being overwhelming. And we hear a lot about negative social interactions, so if you go in to a place and people are mean to you, or don't want to talk to you, or look at you funny, those are things that are unwelcoming. On the flipside, you know, when you walk in and people say hi, or they know your name, those are some of the social things that we started to hear in those discussion groups about what might be welcoming. So we really tried to take those different categories and broke it down into physical features of the environment, the sensory, the sounds, the smells, the social environment which we thought would probably be very important in terms of how others treat you in the environment but also what the space allows for in terms of social interaction. We also included the activity environment, so the things that you can do in the space. And then something we called the behavioral environment, which is, what are the rules of the space, are they strictly enforced, or are they more loose. Is it something that is specifically posted or is it just sort of natural evolving rules that you go in and you know you have an expectation of how you should behave…

7:40:629

Kyra: (crosstalk) right…

7:40.789

Gretchen: …within the space.

7:41:652

Kyra: Mmkay. So, data collection wrapped up a few months ago, and…

7:45:072

Gretchen: (crosstalk) Yes.

7:45:498

Kyra: …you're currently working on at least one Welcoming Spaces manuscript, maybe several. Can you talk about the findings?

7:52:711

Gretchen: Yeah, so it's interesting to go in and hear the perspectives of people. So the approach that we used for this study was, we asked them to respond to more of the concrete or close ended questions, but we also asked them just to talk about the spaces. So, we have a mix of both quantitative and qualitative data, so we can really get in to the richness of how they talked about these different spaces. And what we found, kind of first and foremost, is that people identified places in their community where they feel welcomed, as a person with mental illness. And that's huge, because we want to be able to put out the message, and we want the community to know, that there are these spaces where people are feeling welcomed. We would love for the community side of things, for people to think about how we can be more welcoming. But also from a mental health or a provider standpoint, we hear a lot of reasons why people don't go out in the community, and there's also paternalistic attitude of protecting. And we never want to support people to go into negative environments, but if we know there are spaces that are welcoming, and we know that from this study, we think this can help start some of those conversations between individuals with lived experiences and whoever their supports may be, it might be family members or friends or loved ones, but it could also be professional supporters.

9:07:335

Kyra: Right.

9:08.219

Gretchen: I got sidetracked, I don't think I directly answered your question. But what are we learning?

9:12.302

Kyra: Yeah, research findings.

9:14.038

Gretchen: Yeah! So when you look at the physical features most of the space tended to be more open. So if you think about high ceilings, libraries had high ceilings, shops tended to be you know more open. Except for restaurants and coffee shops, coffee shops tended to be described as less open. Natural lighting was common across most spaces, again except for restaurants and coffee shops, but I think those just, if you know Philadelphia, spaces tend to be smaller because we have less physical space available, so those tended to be a little bit more closed and I guess darker, less likely to have natural light.

I'll take a step back and talk about the types of spaces. So we asked people about the number of spaces that they identified, and people identified a lot. So we asked in categories, shops, restaurant, religious communities, recreation, park spaces, and across the board people were identifying really that they felt welcomed in all of these locations. I think it was about 50% in

each of the categories. So none of them really stood out. And then we asked questions for them to go into one space specifically and describe it. And we tried to capture different types of locations, so if they wanted to describe a park, we didn't want 100% of our participants describing parks, so we asked, if they said a space that was commonly described before, we would ask them to explore another space where they felt welcomed. So, we have some pretty rich detail on libraries, parks, restaurants and cafes, shops, and religious communities. Oh, cultural spaces, that was another one that I.. that I forget to mention. I think that's it, I think…

10.52.970

Kyra: (crosstalk) yeah…

10.53.018

Gretchen: …those are the main categories.

10.54.227

Kyra: Ok. So you started to go into a bit of this before, but I was wondering, in terms of inclusion and participation, going even beyond maybe a practitioner or provider standpoint, how can this research be used to promote more welcoming spaces in the community, within the general population, how can we reach proprietors or cafe managers, and what not.

11.14.545

Gretchen: Yeah, so, I mean, while we did interview a hundred people, this is still really just scratching the surface, particularly because as people describe spaces, we have a smaller group that are describing those subcategories that I just talked about. But again, this starts to open the door to have conversations about how to think about universal design. And when I say universal design, I mean really planning the space for everyone, and we often think about this in terms of physical accessibility for people who are wheelchair-users, who have physical disabilities, but we often don't think about individuals who have mental health conditions. So one of the things that we found in terms of the social environment was that people often went alone, so they weren't necessarily bringing people there, and they frequently would join conversations, so that tells you something about the welcomingness of the space, like people felt comfortable talking to other people. We don't know necessarily what those conversations were, but it's the fact that they were having conversations with the general public versus just with the person that they came with. We also know that over half of the participants in all of the spaces felt like a "regular," that someone else in the space that they considered a friend, and they also felt that some of the regulars considered them friends. And so we see that there's opportunities for relationships within those spaces. And so if you take a step back and think about the literature, we know that people with mental illnesses tend to have smaller social support networks, knowing that going into the community and that your welcoming space can be a space where you have people that you identify as friends and that you feel they identify you as friends, starts to expand what your social network looks like.

And so, if you think about parks and recreation, their mission isn't just to fill their space, their mission is to be a resource for the community. And they want people to engage in fun activities- parks often there's a focus on physical activity- but it's within their mission to be welcoming to their community. And so sometimes when you present this as an idea, it's like, oh, yeah we definitely want to do that. You know, if you talk to the museum, and you say, hey, would you

like to talk about ways that you can be welcoming to everybody, including people with mental illnesses, it changes the conversation. And I think we have some information now from individuals with lived experience that we can use to inform those community providers, when they're thinking about how to serve the general public. And I don't know that we have necessarily recommendations for architects as they're designing spaces, there was diversity across participants that we talked to. But you know if you're thinking about a building, and you could have very small windows that don't let in light, or you could have open windows that let in light, it tended to be more commonly identified that having natural light was a feature of these welcoming spaces. And it's just good design anyways, so that might be something to consider if you're at a point where you're designing a space. But really I think it's more importantly considering the activities that can occur within the space. What we found is that people did different things in different spaces. And so sometimes people would go for opportunities to socialize, even it was at, you know, a shop, so the main activity of the space should be shopping, because that's what it's there for, but clearly there was opportunities for socialization within that space as well.

14.34.093

Kyra: Right. And speaking of environments- which is basically what we're speaking about- a lot of the participants for this study, or most of them, live in urban environments in Philadelphia. So what about folks who might live in a more rural environment? How would that change things?

14.49.137

Gretchen: Ah, that's another research project!

 14.50.190

Kyra.   (laughs) Ooh!

14.52.128

Gretchen: I mean, urban environments have opportunity because things are in closer proximity, and you know, if we talk about barriers to participation, we do know that transportation is often identified as a barrier to participation. It's less of an issue in urban environments because we have things like public transit, communities are much more walkable, but you have other issues, like crime that might prevent participation. Rural environments, I don't know the answer to that, I would anticipate that similar spaces would be identified, because what was identified weren't necessarily unique to an urban environment.

15.25.396

Kyra: (crosstalk) Right…

15.25.583

Gretchen: Um…Depending on how rural you go, most communities have libraries, a lot of communities have religious spaces, whether it's a church or a synagogue, you know, there are parks within rural communities. But you might see that there are other things that come up, just in the fabric of the community. You know, my side of the family grew up in much more rural environments, so I'm trying to think of some of those spaces that might have been more important. You may see that bigger social events occur in a church basement, so to speak, if there's something like a Sunday potluck kind of thing, instead of just going to hang out at the coffee shop.

16:01.6
Kyra: (crosstalk) Right.

16.01.6
Gretchen: It really just depends, I think it is looking at the spaces that are in those environments, but then having the conversations, which I think is what, this study really shifted the perspective, is having conversations with people with lived experience to try to understand where they're going and feeling welcome, and then talking about the things that they see and experience within those spaces.

16.23.964
Kyra: So, I had the privilege of doing data collection for this project, and it actually started to change the way that I think spaces, and I've been identifying my own welcoming and unwelcoming spaces in the community. So working on this project has really shifted my own perspective on environments, and my relationship to different spaces. Do you have a welcoming space, and did working on this project sort of effect your perspective?

16.50.204
Gretchen: I mean, even when we were designing it, it made me think about spaces where I felt welcomed. And unwelcomed - I have told this story a few times, but, I have a dog, and he's very friendly with the people he knows, but he's shy, he's a shy dog, Nido. And Nido doesn't particularly care for "dog park," and there was a dog park that was literally across the street from my house, and so you know, I tried to introduce him and take him there, and it was funny because you would see people in dog park who go all the time, and they were talking about their dogs, they were like interacting with each other, and there was this small community of dog park participants, and I never totally felt welcomed. Nobody was mean to me, people would talk to me, but because my dog didn't really interact with the other dogs, the owners also didn't really interact with me. So, you know, that was not a space that I necessarily felt particularly welcomed, so we stopped going to dog park.

17.46.386
Kyra: Right.

17.46.902
Gretchen: But I guess, you know, it terms of welcoming spaces, when I lived downtown there was a coffee shop that I went to frequently. And you know, I knew the baristas that worked there, not well, but I knew them well enough to have some just general conversations. If you ask how their doing and they say, oh I've got a test coming up, I can follow up with that and say, how did it go?

18:07.215
Kyra: Yeah!

18:07.637
Gretchen: Or they would ask, how's your day, how's your dog, they have enough information about you that you can have an interaction that seems personal without it being, like, overly personal.

18:16.311
Kyra: Like they might not be your best friend but…

18.18.503
Gretchen: (crosstalk) Yeah!

18.18.503
Kyra: … you have a type of relationship with them that you might think about, you'll remember you conversations…

18:22.847
Gretchen: (crosstalk) Yeah!

18:23:180
Kyra: …and it is…

18:23.730
Gretchen: and it…

18.23.730
Kyra: …it is a meaningful interaction.

18:24.709
Gretchen: And it reminds me, there was something on NPR recently that, you know, having conversations with strangers can make your day go better. I'm…

18:31.529
Kyra: I was just reading that!

18.32.435
Gretchen: …I'm not one to necessarily strike up a conversation with the person on the subway with me, because it makes me feel uncomfortable, but I don't mind having those conversations with people when you have the opportunity to talk to them, to expand it beyond just the, "I would like this to drink," conversation.

 And you know, other things about that space, it was very light and airy, there were big windows in the front, there were plants, I always tried to sit by the window with the plants. They also had a space out back. There was always people in there but it was never like overwhelmingly loud. One of my favorite things in that space is that they often feature local artists, so the art within the space changes.

But since I've moved, I now live in the suburbs, and I would say that my church is one of my welcoming spaces. Because there was a diversity of people, you walk in and it's not all one race or gender, there was definitely some multicultural representation, which is nice to see. My husband is African American and I am white, and so it helped make us feel more of the fabric in the church community. I've been going there for a little over a year now, and they've seen me go from right after my husband and I got married we started going there, then I was pregnant, and then after I had my son, he was very welcomed there, and they were all very excited to see him and meet him. You know they've been welcoming to, believe it or not, babies cry, and sometimes he would cry during service, and it was very much like, you don't feel like you have to go and isolate, you're welcome to stay in here. The pastors always said, "I can out talk any baby!" And so it's things like that, they recognized that your situation has changed, or is

different, and they want to do things that sort of make you feel included and part of the space. Without calling attention to it, but making sure that they see your situation and say, you're part of us. So that's been a very welcoming space since I've moved.

20.19.420

Kyra: Cool. Well, thank you so much for talking with me today, Gretchen, and if any of our listeners would like to learn more about our welcoming spaces project, feel free to contact us!

20.32.143
[Music]

20.34.069

Kyra: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of Collab Chats! I'm Kyra Baker, our producer and editor is Sydney Taylor, and our music is by Kevin Macleod. Collab Chats is a Knowledge Translation Activity developed by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Community Living and Participation for Individuals with Serious Mental Illnesses. Funding for this podcast and support for the Collaborative comes from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research. The contents of this podcast do not necessarily represent the policies of NIDILRR/ACL/HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the U.S. Federal Government. If you enjoyed this podcast, and would like to discuss it with us, email us at tucollab@temple.edu. To learn more about our work, you can visit our website at tucollaborative.org, or find us on Facebook at Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion, and on Instagram and Twitter @TUCollab.

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End of Podcast