Best practice in promoting mental health through social connectedness

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A familiar pattern…

How do these two things matter?

⇒ The social contexts we participate in
⇒ The physical places we participate in
The people we participate with across 3 domains of life

Household
Workplace
Community

Household
Workplace
Community

Mental Health

⇗ Does profile of participation matter?
Mental health & wellbeing

- People’s lives involve multiple competing demands and stressors
  - Family, work and community
  - Relationships, money, time, and energy
  - Loneliness and limited options (vs. social identity and freedom)

- Stress buffering hypothesis says having multiple things going on in your life is good because you can offset the bad with the good.

Does participation across multiple contexts help buffer against bad experiences?
The Canberra Study (n=822)

- Community sample of Canberrans completed an online survey about their participation and social connectedness across work, household and community as well as their wellbeing.

- Social connection measures…
  - Social identification with people in work, household and community contexts
    - Belonging, Closeness, Important things in common (asked for work & household only)
    - People important to me
  - Leadership role within each context
    - For some things I’m in charge
  - Breadth of community activities
    - Across 14 types of community activity

- Were all significantly associated with better wellbeing
  - Depression subscale of the DASS21 (reversed)

⇒ But not everybody participated in work and household contexts…
The Canberra Study (n=822)

- **Household, Work and Community (n=607)** [3 Contexts]
  - Age: M=37.6, SD=12; Female: 66.4%; Financial stress: 23.6%; Full-time work: 73.5%, Resident partner: 74.0%, Resident children: 30.4%.

- **Work and Community (n=73)** [2 Contexts]
  - Age: M=40.5, SD=12.8; Female: 63.0%; Financial stress: 22.9%; Full-time work: 84.9%.

- **Household and Community (n=111)** [2 Contexts]
  - Age: M=47.8, SD=18; Female: 66.7%; Financial stress: 21.6%; Retired: 41.4%; Student: 22.5%; Home duties: 28.8%, Resident partner: 66.6%, Resident children: 22.4%.

- **Community (n=31)** [1 Context]
  - Age: M=51.5, SD=20.2; Female: 64.5%; Financial stress: 19.4%; Retired: 61.3%; Student: 29%.

⇒ Are more contexts protective? Does having fewer contexts create a vulnerability?
Disconnection at work worse if live alone?

Yes

People who live alone are more vulnerable to low social identity connectedness at work (sense of belonging and things in common).
Disconnection at home worse if don’t work?

Yes
People who do not work are more vulnerable to low leadership role at home

“For some things I’m in charge”
Disconnection from community worse if don’t work and/or live alone?

If you have neither then yes. People who do not work AND live alone are more sensitive to connectedness with friends and family (these people are important to me).
Does community only matter as a “back up”? No!

• Breadth of community participation was a significant predictor of wellbeing across all populations, including in multivariate testing for the importance of all types of connectedness, and adjusting for demographic characteristics.

⇒ How can we promote community participation?
Takes us back to…

- Social participation
- Sense of connectedness
- Mental Health

But can we build places that promote it?
Current ideas about building for better health

- Get people walking
- Give them places to meet, wait and do activities

**Street design**
- Well maintained footpaths and bike paths

**Destinations**
- Lots of nice places to go that are fairly close together
- Facilities for comfortable waiting at public transport stops encourages incidental interactions

**Safety**
- Must feel safe or won't interact

**Aesthetics**
- Good quality space where that are attractive, comfortable and stimulating
The Crace Study

- A new suburb in Canberra, Australia designed to encourage healthy and sustainable behaviour
  - Designed as a ‘mini-city’: high-density urban precinct around a shopping centre surrounded by suburban areas.
  - ‘Walkable’ grid design with 25% of total land for common use, including extensive walking / bike paths, houses < 400m from bus stops and in walking distance of multiple parks and shops.
  - Pattern book for design of houses to allow individuality within a general style

- Longitudinal design: Repeated surveys every year for at least 3 years
  - Check in with people about their lifestyle and health as their suburb is built around them
  - See how the introduction of different parks and amenities affects different people living in different parts of Crace.
Parks under construction

Year 1
Current ideas about building for better health

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Measures

• **House**
  – The place I live meets my needs
  – My place is comfortable
  – I feel at home in my place
  – My place is good for having visitors
  – I like the style my place is built in

• **Neighbourhood**
  – There are many interesting things to look at
  – There are many attractive natural features
  – There are trees along the sidewalks
  – I like the style of the buildings

• **Development**
  – There is loud noise from trucks and other sources
  – There is rubbish and litter laying around

• **Index of informal social connectedness inside Crace**
  – I spend time out and about in Crace; I chat with my neighbour(s) when I bump into them; I go into a neighbour's house and/or garden; I socialise in the homes and/or gardens of others in Crace; I attend body corporate meetings; I attend community event(s) & functions in Crace; I do things with my friend(s) who don’t live with me in Crace; I do things with family member(s) who don’t live with me in Crace; I socialise with workmate(s) outside work in Crace.

• **Distress : K10**
Year 1

- CFI = 1.00
- RMSEA = .01
- Chi-sq = 52.91, p=.44
Year 2

- CFI = .98
- RMSEA = .05
- Chi-sq = 71.91, p = .04
Aesthetics and sociality in suburb

- Appreciation of home and neighbourhood aesthetics is a driver for social behaviour in Crace
- Some evidence that people can have a general sensitivity to environment (good and bad elements) but in the context of a new suburb the bad elements do not have a negative impact on social behaviour and mental health
- Indirect effects for aesthetics on health are small, but small effects were expected because:
  - Aesthetics is only one element of the built environment
  - Neighbourhood context is likely to be more or less meaningful and convenient depending of stage of life and profile of participation across contexts
Summary

• Low connectedness is more likely to be a mental health vulnerability for those engaged in fewer contexts

• Breadth of community participation is consistently important

• Engagement in local community is partly driven by perceived quality of home and neighbourhood features