

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 14 – Naomi Levine

Intro - Hi, I'm Charmaine Williams, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic, for the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Welcome to Profiles in Social Work. This podcast series is produced by our Faculty and Alumni Association. In 2014 the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work is celebrating 100 years of contributing to Social Work Practice and Education. You can find out more about us by visiting us online at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights how social workers are making a positive difference in our communities by presenting stories of how social work graduates are using their degrees. We hope you will enjoy this series. Especially if you are thinking about a career in social work or interested in hearing about what social workers do.

Profile – Naomi Levine

My name is Naomi Levine and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2008.

I did an undergrad in Psychology and that peaked my interest in counseling in general. I didn't really know what I was getting myself into but I did my BSW after that, and that was sort of my "in" into social work. It wasn't really until I was really in the program that I really understood what social work was all about which is often what happens, even though you do your research and you speak to people.

What I really liked about social work at U of T was that being a social worker didn't mean doing exactly what everyone else was doing: with children & families, mental health, geriatrics and anti-oppression work. I liked that you had the different options and you could specialize you could take what you learn into different areas. I really liked how they also incorporated the practicum into the program so you did schoolwork and the practicum at the same time so that they threw you out into the field but at the same time you could come back and take courses and integrate what you were practicing with your learning which I thought was really important.



My placement was interesting. It was a place that purely did sexual abuse work and also only adolescents, no adults. Kids who perpetrated sexual abuse as well as kids who were survivors of sexual abuse; sexual abuse that occurred within the family. So it was very specific, it was very specialized work. It was interesting for me to be able to learn very specialized work but at the same time generalize it and pick up general social work practical learning.

I work with young offenders. I started off working as a youth probation officer, working for the government. Kids getting sent your way, who have been found guilty of a criminal offense and/or they're about to be sentenced. All of them have been found guilty of a criminal offense and it's supervising them in the community as well as supporting them and helping them find resources out in the community and supporting them with their goals, doing assessments, looking at what areas in their life have contributed to them getting into trouble with the law, school, peers substance use, leisure time, personality, attitude, all the different areas that may contribute to someone committing an offense and setting up supports and goals for them to target those areas as well as supporting them in the community. So that's probation work, as well as the piece of enforcing, to making sure that they comply with their court orders. It's really the double hat of doing the social work piece as well as enforcing court orders in case they breach.

So that is how I started off working with young offenders and I did that after I completed my bachelors of social work and after I went back and did my MSW at U of T I continued with young offenders but in a youth custody facility, doing social work inside the facility. So it was similar work, more clinical work, more crisis work, I would say, some kids were there long term although the majority of the kids are in and out in a few days. It was really crisis work, resourcing, you know, planning for when you leave, reintegration work, getting in touch with families and tools in the community, and trying to make sure they have a place to go back to cause some kids to know they're not leaving to nothing, to not have a home and not having a job, so helping them with those things as well as while they're in the facility helping them negotiate and navigate the facility. Going to school if they're there long enough.

Programming can be as clinical as the kid wants to, so they could see psychology or social work for clinical work. Clinical work would be sitting down to do counseling or therapy. The topic or the goal or the issues dealt with in therapy would be individualized depending on what the kid needs. So it could be trauma work or substance use or emotions management, problem solving, anything like that. Could be as simple as the kid has some sort of attachment disorder, when it takes a very long time to build trusting



relationships and social relationships, has a hard time trusting people so even sitting down with him in the living area and playing a game of checkers with them and just socializing, role modeling positive behavior; could be as basic as just chatting.

Programming could also be setting them up with physical activity, so getting them onto a running program, or you know a music program, pottery. In the facility we have also lots of great programs in the school, hands on programs like auto mechanics or construction, mason work; there's lots of different programs in the facility. Really figuring out what the kid wants, while they're there and helping to get them what they want.

When I worked in the secure custody, there are secure walls around the facility so they cannot go out to school. We did have a school, like a full out school, on campus, the physical facility looked like a huge open space with cottages disbursed around the perimeter. Inside the walls, though, of the facility and inside the cottages they had their own bedrooms, a little basketball court, a living area and an eating area, and they would actually have to leave their cottage and walk to the school building. And that's a secure custody facility. There are social workers who work in open custody facilities, and those look like a big home or a group home, they actually look very similar to group homes but the rules are different. They're more secure. Kids that are in open custody often leave the home to go to school outside of the home, while they're in open custody.

Working with young offenders, I would say the biggest challenge is that they are mandated, in that they're not coming to you to see you because they want to see you for counseling or social work, because they want to come see you out of their own free will. Someone who comes and wants to see you is very much ready to participate in counseling and wanting help but a lot of this clientele are here because they are forced to be here. So I would say the first step in working with kids who are mandated is just building a rapport, getting comfortable, having them trust you and getting them to a place where they see that they might need a bit of help or getting them to a place where they could see "Oh I might need to make changes in this or that area of my life", "Maybe this isn't working for me". So they're not yet at the stage where "I need help, please help me" but they're like "Okay, um, everything's great and peachy why do I have to be here, why am I here". So it's just really basic, so it's like a few steps back, compared to, I would say a lot of the traditional social work in other fields. That's just the uniqueness of working with this population, you could say it's challenging to get them sometimes to see past and want to get help but I would say it's also fun. It's an interesting work, it's interesting work, challenging sometimes, they can be more prone to violence, or aggression. A lot of people ask me "do you feel safe?", I personally have always felt



safe working in the youth custody facility. I guess the challenge would be that you get too comfortable, and that you have to remember where you are and who you're working with. But I would say the reason why I feel safe is because my work is to build relationships and to help. I have to be more mindful of the young people maybe hurting each other, or hurting correctional officers or youth service officers who are try to break up fights. But I don't think I've ever felt in a situation where I was targeted, you just have to be mindful with this work, that these kids sometimes are more prone to be more aggressive.

The rewards would be, I would say, little, little things, like getting a kid into school where, you know, he was out of school for so many months or years, getting a kid to speak to his parent, where they didn't have a relationship before, getting the kid to realize that using tons of drugs might be harmful. Getting a kid to a place where they can agree to using less drugs and go to school. It's usually small steps, usually small steps. In counseling and social work in general we see kids and families for short periods of time relative to their lifespan so you can only do so much. When kids or families come to you, you see them at different stages of their development. You might see a kid who is really young and you can have a great impact on changes and on their future. Whereas you might see seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds who might be more entrenched in a lifestyle that's getting in the way of them being able to go out and work and reach their goals. I would say reach their goals they don't have yet, sometimes they don't have goals to go to work or go to school.

Social Work is an interesting field because different people take it on in different ways. Some people see it as a helping profession, and some people see it as more as a facilitation. I try to stay away from "I'm here to help you", because first of all, people don't always want your help and that could really turn people off and it can really dis-empower someone because I'm not there for the rest of your life and I'm not going to help you for the rest of your life. I'm trying to help facilitate a process where you can help yourself. For me, that means working with families, setting supports in place where families can help one another, where they can help themselves by reaching out to their families, to their communities.

I see social work a bit differently than psychology in that aspect, although we pull a lot from psychology in the clinical counseling therapy piece where we do cognitive behavioural therapy or different forms of therapy. The unique focus of social work is that we also look at systems, and we try to not only specifically focus on the individual but really look at families and systems and community.



Going into a MSW program can be confusing because there are so many fields you can go into, there's lots of populations you can work with, I chose to do counseling. For me, what helped was to find your comfort zone and really think about what your goals are, what you want to do what population speaks to you, who you feel comfortable working with. For me, it happened to be teenagers, I love working with teenagers.

Social Work is also interesting because you don't have to get stuck for fifty years working with one population, but you could eventually branch out, you can go into management if that's something you are interested in, or go into policy eventually or upgrade your education and move around. The uniqueness of social work is that you can do a lot with an MSW.

Outro - This is Charmaine Williams from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. In 2014 our school is celebrating 100 years of social work research, teaching and community service. For more information about the faculty and our programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca