

## Profiles in Social Work

Episode 21 – Hari Viswanathan

**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](http://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 - Hari Viswanathan

My name is Hari Viswanathan and I graduated with a combined JD/MSW degree from the University of Toronto Faculty of Law and Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2001.

I kind of fell into social work through a bit of a fluke I guess. I initially started off applying to the JD program which at the time was the LLB program at the University of Toronto, I was kind of interested in focusing my legal career in a social justice area – I was thinking about poverty law, immigration law, also focusing on legal practice from an advocacy perspective. There is a very strict regimen in most law schools in first year, you have a number of core courses that you need to take. From my perspective I wanted to create a bit of an anchor for myself in the social justice area so the Faculty of Social Work seemed like the right choice. I also had a bit of a background, my father was a professor in social work so, I was kind of inculcated all along in the social work ideals and values. From that perspective it seemed like a very good fit.

I recall the very strong focus on the practicum placements and how that was such an enriching way to learn about what was happening in your community, what was happening on a broader level in terms of the broader province and even the federal level, so having the opportunity to do what is really essentially a co-op placement

allowed me to consider the breadth and range of opportunities that were available to someone with my particular background. My first placement was at a homeless low-income housed community centre and that allowed me to really understand the issue of homelessness from I think a perspective that people in academia or studying homelessness may not have the same kind of access to. It was a great way to ground your academic studies into what was happening in the real world essentially. The second thing I recall is being provided the opportunity to explore a number of different areas of academic work in your coursework. The courses themselves obviously had their own focus; you study mental health and addictions for example, but within the framework of that particular topic. There was a significant amount of opportunity to explore an area of interest to you and the professors encouraged that. So I really appreciated the fact that I could look at for example, post-modern discourse with respect to mental health and addictions. I think about how contemporary Canadian thinkers thought about these issues or how you could apply their thinking to these different issues. So it allowed me to expand my area of focus and allowed me to think quote unquote outside the box a little bit and explore issues of interest to me. It was definitely a good experience.

Having the combined degree has allowed me to pursue unique areas. Immediately after I graduated I did article as a lawyer in a firm and then decided that I wanted to pursue a career in the government working as a child advocate, really focused on working with children and youth both in custody facilities and in care facilities and advocating for their rights in those different environments. Part of our role was to interview clients and develop systemic policy papers. These papers were presented to the deputy minister and the minister of the day as advocacy papers essentially, to push forward the rights of children so that they were provided with better care in custody facilities at the end of the day. So it had both a client-based focus and a broader systemic focus which I really appreciated.

Another piece of legislation that I helped develop and I think the social work and legal degree came in handy was the Adoption Information Disclosure Act. It was known as the Adoption Information Disclosure Act at the time, that focused on opening up access to birth and adoption records for adoptees and their birth parents to facilitate reunions. There was a lot of emotion around that particular initiative and meeting with stakeholders and receiving their input and also providing advice to our minister at the time. It did involve my drawing upon my social work skills and also my legal skills to interpret what regulation we were bringing forward and to ensure that it did cover off all of the particular legal impediments that it potentially could create.

Another opportunity that stuck out for me was working as a lawyer on the Air India inquiry. That allowed me to work with the families and represent their interests in what was an inquiry that not only had a national focus but an international focus. Again drawing upon my legal skills ensuring that I had an understanding of legal process, of evidence of a number of different key legal areas, but in addition to that having the ability to relate to the families and what they had been through. And working as a social worker in a number of key areas you develop that sense of empathy and you actually develop those core values which allows you I think to practice law in an environment like that in a way that is conscientious of people's different needs and interests.

My current role is, the official title is the executive assistant to the deputy minister of community and social services. The role itself is focused on primarily to provide strategic advice to the deputy minister on the whole host of areas that the ministry deals with. So an example would be Ontario Works which is our general welfare system in the province. Another example could be the province's accessibility agenda. The province has moved forward in implementing what's called the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act that's focused on making Ontario accessible for people with disabilities by 2025. And a third example would be providing services and supports to people with developmental disabilities.

It's a fairly broad range of issues that I deal with on a day to day basis but just to give you an idea of what a typical day would involve, assistant deputy ministers would bring forward different policy or program initiatives to the deputy minister and brief her on those initiatives, so I would be responsible for sitting in on those briefings, in advance of the briefings reviewing the materials that come forward for the briefing and ensuring that they essentially capture, not only the particular approach or initiatives of a particular division within our ministry but that there is a broader focus, so for example if there is a policy initiative being brought forward ensuring that that policy initiative does take into account program criteria or program issues and as well communication issues, so how does one communicate this information to the public, so that would be my initial focus. Once I review the materials providing those either back to the deputy ministers for further review and analysis or directly to the deputy minister for her review and then subsequent to that sitting in on the briefing that occurs around those materials. On a day to day basis we'll get anywhere from one to twenty requests from the minister's office in a number of different areas, either to manage issues, to seek information or clarity on particular events and/or to ask a specific policy question about a particular initiative that is moving forward. So my responsibility will be to manage in my office all of

those requests that come in and to ensure that the information that is provided back to the minister's office is done efficiently and accurately and in a timely fashion.

Having a focus on soft skills, so managing relationships, that's probably the biggest challenge. Part of your role is to manage the expectations of the minister's office. The minister's office obviously will want information right away in all cases. It's almost like a triage nurse to ensure that as information comes in or requests come in that you are able to manage that information and balance those requests with the needs of the assistant deputy minister's offices who are basically responsible for developing the information, so that they are prioritizing those most urgent requests and that they have time to actually deprioritize those items that maybe aren't as urgent. So you're constantly playing relationship manager because you are responding to requests and trying to be as responsive as possible to the minister's office, at the same time not wanting to overload the assistant deputy minister's offices and their policy branches and program branches so they're able to produce information in a timely fashion but also to produce accurate and realistic and effective pictures of what the minister's office is looking for. The other challenge is ensuring that you can interpret and understand what is often sometimes very complex policy, and explain that in an effective manner to your minister's offices. So you'll have for example a new person starting up in the minister's office who may have a fairly diversified and complex portfolio. They may for example focus on social assistance or income support and the rules around income support and eligibility are often very complex. So part of your role is to be able to understand and identify the key issues and explain them to someone who may not have that level of background in a way that is easy to understand, that they can appreciate.

There are always the core social work values around inclusion, around social justice, anti-oppression and to a great degree as well the ability to listen and communicate effectively; these are all core social work values. The ability to empathize with people's circumstances but also to listen carefully and work with people in a way that allows them to reflect the best of their abilities from the perspective for example of a person in the developmental services sector. It's absolutely crucial to include in any sort of policy development that you are moving forward on a key stakeholder component, so not only meeting with the agencies that represent individuals with developmental disabilities, but also meeting with the people themselves and getting a really good sense of their particular life circumstances and how that should influence the policy that you are working on.

Everything that we do particularly in our ministry has an impact directly on Ontarians. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities legislation is focusing on developing

standards in key areas, a specific example: The customer service standard is a particular regulation that focuses on requirements for businesses and organizations to comply with in order to ensure that people with disabilities, but in addition to that just general Ontarians, have access to good customer service. And in 2012, January first, all organizations with one or more employees will be required to comply. And what that means is, if I'm a person with a disability, so let's say I'm a person who's visually impaired, if I'm coming forward to you in a store and I require a particular type of customer service then you will need to provide that for me. If I need you to read out for example a list of menu options or the size on a particular piece of clothing, then it will be incumbent upon you to provide me with that sort of customer service and the regulations which are coming forward in the future will also look at areas such as transportation, information and communication, things like websites, employment. People may assume that it's only people with disabilities who will be impacted, but that's actually not the case. Some of the requirements in the upcoming transportation regulation will look at stop announcements for transportation providers in Ontario. That not only helps people with a visual disability, but it also helps tourists for example who come to the city and may not be familiar with the various stops. Helping to assist in developing key policy allows you to know that you had a hand in developing regulation and legislation that does have an impact across the province.

There's also something very meaningful about not focusing on the bottom line, for example that you often have to focus on in the private sector. Knowing that you are a civil servant and working for the public interest, there are challenges in civil servant role in serving a particular minister. You are non-partisan. Ensuring that you are reflective of all positions, sometimes is a challenge. At the end of the day you are able to represent the broader position I guess of Ontarians across the province so that's also very meaningful.

I think what's unique about the intersection between law and social work is that when you are practicing law, and you have access to what social work has taught you, and you can also pursue areas of legal practice that focus on social justice issues like working in the poverty law area and have that additional qualification or quote unquote credibility in terms of your understanding of social justice issues, and how to serve the client well. I think it's all about thinking about your world and the impact that you have in a way that takes into account the client or the citizen, it does help you to reflect upon your experiences in a way that is quite meaningful and will influence the way that you provide legal services or you work in a policy or program area. The real test I think is, when you are working with people, whether you are able to communicate effectively



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with them and whether you are able to provide services in a way that does account for their unique circumstances and I think social work does provide you with that unique insight into people's lives.

**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](http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca)