Profiles in Social Work

Episode 36 – Sadaf Shallwani

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 – Sadaf Shallwani

My name is Sadaf Shallwani and I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2005.

I was interested in child development and early intervention, how you can work with children and families from a young age to improve short-term and long-term well-being. I had done my undergrad in psychology and I was working in research and I got more interested in applied work. I started volunteering in a few community organizations and realized that I needed to develop that skill base in actually doing applied work with children and families. So that's what led me to apply to the Masters program.

When I think about my time here at the faculty I remember mostly the conversations that I think really stretched my thinking about social justice, equity, anti-oppression. One of the courses I took, started looking at how the knowledge base, so for example research or even discussions and conversations in newspapers and in media reflect certain stereotypes or biases. I had focused at that time on my identity as Muslim, and looking at how not just the media but research literature, journal articles, were talking about Muslims. And I started seeing similarities or commonalities across these conversations that perpetuated certain stereotypes about Muslims, even in sometimes very subtle ways that you would not necessary expect, or maybe I did not expect, from academia or from scholars. That really changed my perspective.

In my second year I did a practicum placement with an agency serving homeless and marginalized women in a community based setting. That was really eye-opening for me. I think I realized many of the stereotypes I and others held about homeless people. And by working directly with women who were facing these circumstances, I realized that they were women just like myself and my peers, who because of turn of events, or because of circumstances in their lives, or their place in society, ended up in these situations of marginalization and oppression. By working closely with the women themselves and understanding the world from their perspective made me feel a sense of solidarity.

When I joined at the Faculty of Social Work I had expected to develop skills and knowledge of working directly with children and families. And through the course work and the social work practicum placements, I started looking at broader communities and systems and policies and how those affect people or populations or groups. That's sort of where I started shifting in my lens on the world. Instead of looking at individual people I started looking at systems and societies and it influenced the direction I took after my social work degree.

 I worked with a few different organizations and the work has fallen into three general areas: working directly with community based programs internationally where I'd been working with communities, organizing communities, developing programs; evaluating education programs or other community programs for their effectiveness, and often I have tried to take community based research methodology approaches to this evaluation work; and this sort of overall objective of conducting research to impact policy - for example looking at the effectiveness of certain educational processes or programs to hopefully impact education policy. The main work I've done in this area was with an international development agency. I was with their head office in Europe. And through them I was responsible to provide support to regional offices in research and evaluation of their own education programs. I might go to South Asia or East Africa to either support the team to carry out a research study or a program evaluation, or to actually carry it out with the support of the local team.

In Pakistan the organization was working with a team of five or six local non-government organizations to implement an early education program. Children live in families but they're also in communities, they're also at schools. The program similarly was aiming to address all of those different components but primarily the school environment. The program was working in collaboration with the government of Pakistan and recruited teachers, established classrooms because in many cases government schools didn't have classrooms dedicated to preschool children, and then provided training and materials as well to those teachers, and ongoing support and monitoring. In some

communities the program extended to families and to communities so there might have been home visits where trained community based workers would visit homes and talk to families and assess children's development, and give suggestions and ideas to mothers and other care givers.

And then in community based settings there might be a community based daycare for children who are under preschool-aged even. What was interesting in this case in particular the intervention was established at the preschool level and then these children were going into Grade 1 and Grade 2 where teachers were using rote methodologies - there was still a lot of corporal punishment, there was a very strict environment and children were having a very hard time adjusting. So the program sort of evolved as the children went from preschool to Grade 1 and started working with Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers. When you visit some of these schools where the program has been in place for eight or nine years now, it's really, really exciting to see how it had a ripple effect throughout the Grade 5, Grade 6 grade levels, where teachers and children started valuing and finding joy in learning. And that's really, really exciting to see. The example has been one of the more ideal schools despite the awareness raising, often the Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers may not get the support that they need to implement a child-centered approach for example to things like reading and math where they feel they have to meet certain curriculum requirements. There's still a lot a lot of work to be done. The idea is that the process has started and at least at the early childhood level there does seem to be an impact at the schools where the program has been implemented.

It was a large scale program. It was in four provinces of Pakistan and probably over two hundred and fifty schools. So we needed a representative research study that could give us a fair indication of whether the program was having an impact or not. So we took a bit more of a standard approach in the sense that we selected a random sample of schools, comparison schools in the same communities that were relatively comparable. So for example if school A was in our program, in that same community we would find school B that had relatively similar demographics, relatively similar school size, and use that as a comparison school. We then tracked these schools over three years. So we took a cohort of children in preschool in both program schools and the comparison schools and we followed their progress through Grade 1 and Grade 2 at their own individual child level. But we also started tracking classroom quality, school facilities, a range of things that would impact that child's outcomes. We had the overall goal of evaluating the program. But in terms of "how do we assess classroom quality?" "What are the factors that we consider important in quality?" Deciding all of those things had to be a collective and participatory process with regional partners. In fact we took a year of adapting a North

American tool for classroom quality. And after a yearlong process it was deemed to be inappropriate and we ended up having to develop our own local tool. In fact it was a year of a lot of learning and growth. And almost all those conversations that happened where we discussed whether this particular dimension of quality was important in the Pakistani context or an issue was relevant that hadn't been addressed in that other tool. Having those conversations and then developing a local tool was very validating for everyone involved and made the research findings more meaningful at the end because we knew that it was something that we all believed in. It was a measure that reflected the realities in Pakistan. That classroom quality measure has now been taken on by teams in Bangladesh and in Kyrgyzstan. So that has also been rewarding for the Pakistan team.

To put it in a nutshell, we did find that the program had a massive influence on practices. But the influence was much stronger at the preschool level than at the Grade 1 or Grade 2 level. And that reflected a lot of what the program staff and schools probably already knew. But it was validating to have those numbers. It provides a map for moving forward and where do you focus where further intervention or training is needed. I was officially based at the head office. And going to a regional office for one thing you're perceived as an outsider, and the second thing there is a power difference. Negotiating that is tricky but it's important. I think it's very important to listen, to be respectful and most of all to be humble and sincere. Acknowledging the power that you hold and really working hard to overcome that so that you can have a more meaningful interaction and actually accomplish the task in a participatory, democratic way.

It's very rewarding to have numbers or words validating that a program is having an effect or not. And I think both are important to know. You want to insure that resources are being used effectively. Ultimately when research findings have the potential to impact practice or policy in our intervention program - that's really rewarding. To be able to give that feedback to the people who are developing the program and implementing the program, to validate the work they're doing and also to help improve the work that they're doing. I can think of many nights where I have been up analyzing data and suddenly I see a trend or a pattern or a result emerging from those findings and It's very exciting to know that my analytic skills as well as all the work behind that. For me to be able to take that back to those communities, from start to finish it's very rewarding, because you end up becoming very intimately connected to the program and to the community through this role you play trying to determine effectiveness or impact.

Broadly speaking, being a social worker to me means to work towards the betterment of society. That might mean working directly with people. It also means working with communities and organizations to improve the contexts, the communities, the

environments in which people are living and growing and existing. The most important characteristic for a social worker or for any person engaging with people and communities is the sense of humility and respect and entering with that open mind and open heart and acknowledging the skill base that you bring to the table but also valuing the voices and the perspectives and the skills and the knowledge of those who you are engaging with. And as social workers the skills we are trained in is to build rapport and work through issues and work toward solutions and we can't do that without truly listening to the people we are working with.

At the Faculty of Social Work, I was Chair of the Graduate Students Association. It enabled me to build these very strong relationships in a leadership capacity with my peers but also with faculty. Part of what you get from the social work program is not just the learning experiences right then, but the relationships that stay with you afterwards. And those become a source of support as well as networking personally and professionally throughout your career.

An MSW degree can provide you with opportunities to see the world in a different way, to see society in a different way fundamentally, to stretch and challenge your own thinking. To someone considering a social work degree I would say to push yourself out of your comfort zone and to take those courses and those practicum placements and even extracurricular activities that you may have not opted to take. You never know which experiences or conversations might actually change your perspective of the world and your own thinking and your own way of interacting with others. Social work is extremely versatile but it is what you make of it.

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