



Profiles in Social Work

Episode 38 – Deborah Goodman

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 – Deborah Goodman

My name is Deborah Goodman and I graduated from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 1983 with my Masters of Social Work and in 1999 with my PhD in Social Work.

I was traveling in Europe in between high school and university and I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I happened to be at a museum in London, England and a security guard there, and I chatted, and he told me to place my ambitions on my strengths and not my strengths in my ambitions. That gave me pause to think about what that might be, and my strengths are working with people and analysis and working with vulnerable groups and serving, and social work was the fit.

What I recall actually is the commitment of the faculty; commitment to the field and excellence and advancing knowledge and improving practice, the breadth of conversation that occurs in the classrooms, the ability of trying to marry what you learn with what you do in the field, and as a student in practicum, and one of my practices was the home for the aged, the other one was in a child welfare setting, that kind of range of diversity has always been my attraction to the Faculty of Social Work.



I have the honour and privilege of working at my dream job. That is working in the area of research and evaluation and training for the field. In my team we have researchers and research assistants and training managers and we provide services to the field in that area. So at any point in time we have thirty to forty research and program evaluations on the go. So it's helping the field ask and answer their good questions. Or as we like to say those hard, brave, tough, difficult questions about the work we do and how we can try to improve upon it. The field really is vulnerable children and youth and their families and the systems that they come into contact with. Probably around child welfare although in today's age of collaboration and partnerships, borders are sort of blurry and a lot of our evaluation work is working with children's mental health, it's working with health, youth justice, education and trying to follow those children and youth and families through those various systems to try to better understand what works, and for whom, and for how long, and how can we try to improve upon it. And it's bringing in training that is not only core but cutting edge. So one of the areas that we brought in was trauma and child welfare and understanding that a lot of our behaviours and issues and challenges that our children in care have, come from perhaps a trauma history.

One of the projects is with some children's mental health agencies and the child welfare agency that I work for will refer our families to these agencies for counselling. So one of the things we did was we tracked those referrals through and then back again as they came back to child welfare. Because families, they want to know when they are referred to a service "does it work, is it going to help me, am I going to be in a better place having gone to a group or taking counselling". So what we found when we analyzed this data was for those families and youth who engaged with the children's mental health worker and went through their program, about eighty percent of those children either remained at home or went home. But for the children and youth and families who didn't want to partake in the counselling, who didn't want to work with the agency, eighty percent of those children either stayed in care or went into care. And so for the fifteen year-old, I would hope that's powerful information to make a decision about - "yeah I really don't want to but I could see a big benefit in me going to counselling for this because I get to stay at home".

We work with the agencies and we work with the youth and the families. So any tools that we develop we vet with the families around appropriateness and language and ease-of-use. And we develop as much as we can a very rigorous evaluation methodology that will allow us to ask and answer "does this program work?" And so it's working with that organization about what tools do they use already. In this particular



one they use a standardized tool that is used across the province. But we would also expand that around doing focus groups and interviews, doing a pre-test and a post-test so we understand from time one to time two what those changes would be. And measuring them against those that did not engage and what those outcomes were for those families, so that we can tell the story accurately and adequately about the effects of that program. And each program may be a bit different. So some may be more exploratory and we're doing more qualitative methodology. Some programs are further down the line and we're doing much more rigorous evaluation design.

All of the researchers and evaluators that work with me have been front-line workers. And so they bring good clinical skills. We've had a nurse and we have someone who has their doctorate in psychology as well as social workers. They all have good clinical experience that they're able to use to be better researchers and bridge with the field about what is a reasonable question to ask. 'Cause not all questions are research questions, not all questions are evaluation questions. And so it's working with them to say so what is it that you want to know, do you want to know "did the worker get trained in the way that they were intended?" "Did the service get delivered in the way that it was supposed to?" "Are the outcomes that you're achieving the ones that you want?" "What are the unintended outcomes?" working with the program to understand what it is that they want and need to know at this point. I look for researchers who have a good understanding of what that work is.

Some of the biggest challenges have to do with the culture. As a learning organization evaluation may not be a common part of practice. They may not have anyone in-house that can bring that skill set. And then the agency is really relying on outside sources to help answer their questions. A culture that has both horizontal and vertical integration of evaluation throughout it, if that's not there that's a harder challenge.

Funding is always a challenge. Evaluation is not inexpensive. It costs and so organizations often they have a little bit of money. We do pro bono work as well. We apply for grants and we get research funding. Other challenges have to do with our data systems. Our data systems are typically set up to collect financial data, not outcome data. And so for most organizations there's this huge gap, this big chasm between what they need their data systems to do and what they do. You know one of my favourite quotes is by Thomas Edison. When I asked about his ten thousand ways not to invent a light bulb, he said "sticking to it is the genius". And really that's what this is. It's sticking to that paradigm shift that outcome measurement, rigorous evaluation is a part of good clinical practice and we just need to build that in and keep honing it, everybody.



If the purpose of the intervention is to improve the condition, the purpose of evaluation is to improve the program. And so you always do evaluation to make improvements. For example, you have an amazing program and ninety-five percent of people who come improve in the ways that you're anticipating, whatever those outcomes are. Program evaluation will say "let's aim for ninety-six" "What is it about those five percent that didn't work?" "Can we do something different - understand what didn't work for them to get them in to the ones that did." You're wanting to improve.

A lot of the rewards have to do with getting data to talk in a way that tells the story about the good work that social workers do. So when we're able to quite clearly and concisely and emphatically tell both the quantitative and the qualitative stories around why this program works, that's a huge reward. One of the examples - there was this program for substance abusing families. We had a specialist come in from the substance abuse sector who came and sat with our children's aid workers and consulted with them on the cases, and would go out with them on the cases, and provided a standardized training to both our intake workers and our family workers on a less authoritarian kind of approach to working with these families, a more humane engaging approach. We sampled the cases and examined those that got this service and those that didn't. And so we could statistically show that the children who got the substance abusing specialist treatment, spent less time in care, came into care in less numbers than those who didn't get it, they had less re-openings and so it goes on and on about the benefits to those children and families for having got that intervention. That empowers workers. When workers know that their drop in the bucket makes a difference in a really important way - that helps you keep staff. It improves morale. It's a different dialogue with families when you say to them, "I know if you come to this program it will work for eight out of ten".

Being a social worker means committing to being the best that you can be, around doing the work that you're doing with vulnerable children and families and youth. Part of it in our training is to look at the system that were working in and understand the context, to stand back from our fishbowl and take a hard look at it and understand where there's some gaps and where there's some barriers and how we can address those and move things ahead; increase the efficiencies, increase the effectiveness, and just really try to improve.

Social workers come in all sorts of packages and different jobs and roles, and what we wanted to do is really get the field to drive their questions, that skill about evaluating their practice on an ongoing rigorous relevant kind of way and not dependent on someone else to do that. It really is evaluation and research, cause out of evaluation



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may come research questions. In my dream every single social worker knows that they're also an evaluator.

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