



Profiles in Social Work

Episode 42 – Kevin Stoddart

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 – Kevin Stoddart

My name is Kevin Stoddart and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work with my MSW in 1989, my research diploma in 1994 and my doctorate in Social Work in 2003.

My initial interest in social work started when I had a placement at a psychiatric hospital; it was an outpatient clinic. I was part of an interdisciplinary team as an honours student in psychology, and I noticed that there was a social worker on the team. And I hadn't really thought about what social workers did, and I knew I was interested in mental health issues, but I was really interested in her concern and interest in family dynamics around patients with mental health issues. I was always interested in family issues and families from different cultures and I was just really impressed by what she offered to the entire interdisciplinary team and it seemed important to me that there was somebody on the team that was addressing not only the needs of the patient but also their families. So that experience really tweaked my interest and I soon after applied for the Master's program.

The classroom experiences were good but the placement really gave me the practical skills that I needed. I was practicing in a large hospital for both of my placement experiences. I was dealing with adults with mental health issues in my first placement



and children and youth with mental health issues in my second and it really helped me understand on the ground, the biopsychosocial formulation that social workers add to the assessment and also the treatment component when looking at mental health issues in adults and youth. The placement experiences were really key in helping me metabolize the learning in class.

I went out and practiced in a child welfare setting and then returned to my initial interest which was the field of autism spectrum disorders. My third degree at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work was my doctorate. It was a great experience because I had had a number of years in the field doing direct clinical practice with individuals, and throughout that time many questions arose. We were beginning to look at the intersection of mental health and autism spectrum disorders. Many of the clients that we were seeing at the time had bereavement issues, so there was the question of how a person with autism responds to significant loss in their life. So we established a program, piloted and also evaluated the program, and we looked at the response of intervention to bereavement issues, not only in people with autism but other developmental delays. My doctorate really cemented my research interests and set me on a path to be doing research in the profession of social work.

There has historically not been a lot of services for youth and now adults with Asperger's syndrome and other autism spectrum disorders. So a group, primarily of social workers, got together and we founded the centre where I am now director. We developed a fairly comprehensive approach to the issues and struggles which people with autism spectrum disorders, Asperger's syndrome and other neurodevelopmental disorders experience. We have social workers, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists and various coaches to address their needs. I never thought that I would be in a conventional administrative type of position when I entered the field of social work, but I have seen that administration and management of an organization is a key component of our ability to see the bigger picture, address systems issues and address those needs that we see in a proactive way.

Autism is basically a social difference. People with autism spectrum disorders have difficulty interacting socially, interacting in a reciprocal way with other people. Sometimes people with Asperger's syndrome are known to lecture people about favourite topics or interests. We're seeing now a much broader range of individuals with autism spectrum disorders so we may see a preschooler, he may have problems interacting with other kids in his community, in the playground, expressing his needs, playing reciprocally, those sorts of things. Often kids with autism are not identified until they reach school so the social situation really becomes much more complex. They



need to take turns, to share, understand others social agendas, others points of view. They also need to do some things that they don't necessarily want to do like math or reading, so that presents some social challenges and often some behavioural challenges. Autism is characterized by sensory issues as well which means that there may be sensory overload, in some settings the lights may be too bright, a fire alarm may sound, kids are talking and brushing up against other kids; that is all sort of an overwhelming experience to the neurological system of kids with autism spectrum disorder. So we really have learned a lot about how to treat those.

Many teens are struggling with their own identity and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders are no exception. They certainly know by that time that they're struggling with social interaction, making friends, keeping friends, they may have what we call a restricted range of interest, all of those things collude in affecting somebody's quality of life. A restricted range of interest might include hyper focusing on particular topics. Many kids and teens with autism are highly adept at understanding how electronics systems work, so many parents report the child from an early age was interested in small engines and would take apart the vacuum cleaner, much to the mother's dismay, in the middle of the living room and then move to the lawn mower and take that apart and put it back together or be interested in radios or mechanical things. Many people with ASDs are interested in geography and literature and languages and science, law; so those interests are potential precursors to college or university attendance, often leads to careers in particular fields.

Kids with autism grow up. We need to get our heads around the fact that kids with autism grow up and they're not cured, they continue to struggle significantly with the characteristics of autism. We may see adults or youth with autism who are very severely affected require even twenty-four hour support due to their lack of communication skills and potential risky or dangerous situations. Adults with autism spectrum disorders can also be incredibly high functioning. In my clinical practice I see physicians, lawyers, university professors, accountants, engineers, business professionals. And these are people that have until now been undiagnosed with autism or Asperger's syndrome and receiving that diagnosis is a real relief to them and often their family and spouse because they now understand that their set of difficulties or issues has a name. And we're understanding that autism is a highly genetic disorder and it makes sense that people in the family are similarly affected.

Social work as a profession is really good at identifying marginalized populations and look at the multiple factors, either risk or protective factors, to give them an optimal chance in life. Lots of adults with autism spectrum disorders do not have access to



appropriate and knowledgeable services and supports. We had the opportunity to collect data of almost five hundred individuals, youth and adults with autism spectrum disorders in order to create a bit of a profile of people in the community, what issues they're struggling with and also how they have or have not been able to access services to address those issues. My clinical interests and my research interests have led to policy interests. I've had the opportunity to meet with members of parliament and policy advisors in a number of ministries to really begin to address on a broader systemic level the deficiencies in our system when it comes to people with ASDs.

Families are always welcoming of somebody who takes the time to listen, and to listen to their story carefully. When families feel that somebody cares about them, when somebody is concerned about their particular situation, treatment and intervention becomes much easier. Characteristics that are important to the profession of social work: Number one – Ongoing education. Education doesn't stop when you leave the Faculty of Social Work. It's an ongoing process. New knowledge, new research and new trends in the field can really give us renewed interest and motivation to make a difference. The second is self-understanding. We all have strengths and our weaknesses. We need to seek support and feedback from colleagues, friends and family and partners. We cannot ignore our needs while we're addressing the needs of others, and self-care is really critical.

I practice as a clinician, as a researcher, I'm also doing advocacy work, I've written and published. There's so many things that social workers can do. It's been highly rewarding.

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