

## Profiles in Social Work

### Episode 49 – Sonia Pahwa

**Intro** - Hi, I'm Faye Mishna, Professor and Dean, at 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. The Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work has been contributing to social work education, practice and research for over 100 years now. We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights social workers who 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 – Sonia Pahwa

My name is Sonia Pahwa and I graduated from the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2009.

I do have a recollection of social work in my undergrad and I ended going in a different direction; and then social work came across my path a few years later after I finished my undergraduate studies through a very close friend. She said "I have a sense of who you are, there is this course of study, these set of values and beliefs and I feel like they may fit". And it was a fit.

In terms of course content I would say the breadth. I didn't really know all the doors that were open and so that was quite something. Understanding that there were many directions you could take, many different populations, direct practice, indirect practice, and I saw a real longevity in the field.

It was my first experience where myself as a person and as a student was really seen. There was a real listening and an understanding that life is happening all around us as we're going through this course of study. Things come up through your studies and there was a real ear with a view to succeeding. Certainly relationships and support,

specifically support. I had a great academic advisor that sort of walked along side me. That's really what stands out.

Practicum certainly stands out. I was working in a hospital setting and I was part of two medical programs, really rich environment, fantastic supervisor, lots of learning opportunities and what was interesting for me around practicum was I had an opportunity to try both indirect practice and direct and I thought indirect for a while was really going to be the fit and the direction I wanted to go. I had ideas coming into the program and direct practice was what felt best. My focus was therapy: individual, group, families. I had an opportunity to try a little bit of everything; work one on one with in-patients and follow families. That was a real fit.

I work with a counseling oriented organization. The service is free and confidential serving kids and youth. Clients will reach out to us. It's very unique in that it's anonymous. So we don't have a way of following up with clients. Sessions take place in the context of a single interaction, not time-limited, three modalities of access as well which is unique, none of them the traditional face-to-face. One modality would be phone counseling, the second web counseling and then the third instant messaging chat.

We'll get contacts from children and youth all across the country for a variety of topics. Could be a young person feeling the need to leave their home. It could be in a couple of days or it could be looking for shelter that evening. So a counselor will work with them to hear their story, help support them in what they figure they need, so we might kind of unpack and see what the options are for that young person, wanting to keep them safe. If a decision is "I want to go to a shelter, I feel like I need to go here", certainly we have a database of many resources that counselors can look up across the country and then help that young person get from wherever they're standing on a street corner to a bed for the evening. Sometimes we'll get calls around bullying, addictions, maybe someone's had an experience with a certain substance and might call up with a question or write in with a question for a counselor. Could be to do with their health or social relationships. Additionally other calls might look like young people who are doing projects, so those are always welcome. Young people who maybe have some questions around family dynamics, family relationships, questions with parents, maybe there's agreements/disagreements, questions around what's going on at school, agreements/disagreements with friends, in intimate partner relationships, could be academic focused looking at learning skills and questions around that: how to strategize. Questions around next steps. We don't know what their family looks like. So I think it's really important for us to take a real position of curiosity, even their family makeup may be a question that they'd wanna unpack. Are they in a group home? Are



they in a shelter? Are they living with extended family? So in any of those areas there could be questions and conversations that a young person might want to raise. So it really runs the gamut. It's quite broad.

Another piece of the work certainly is crisis intervention. There'll be calls where young people may need immediate assistance. They may be at risk of imminent danger of some kind which may involve EMS services, for example abuse is a big one, physical, sexual something going on wherever that young person is at and they may require assistance to leave that environment immediately. Could be calls around suicidal ideation as well and depending on where a young person is at in that space they may require immediate assistance so certainly a counselor can send out an ambulance to wherever that young person is at if they choose to disclose their identifying information, which is a really unique position cuz then that young person always has control, is in the driver's seat so to speak of the kind of support that they receive.

Currently we have two services that we offer by phone counseling. Typical clients are twenty and under. The youngest that can access us, if anybody can sort of pick up a phone or type in, fantastic we'd love to talk to them. And then the other service looks at university and college students.

The young person might log on to the website and choose which written format they may like. Web counseling might look like an email, where a message is written in and a counselor will respond though there is no identifying information. That young person may have an account with a pseudonym and it will always be most likely a different counselor that responds. Instant messaging chat, sort of the same idea. A young person will write in and that's much more interactive in the moment. Instant messaging chat is something that we wanted to provide to young people for some time and actually came out of requests from children and youth as well as text messaging. We're figuring out a way to get to text messaging which has it's own particular challenges, but there is an application available now.

Telephone versus online, we've done research studies with young people and the feedback they've given, whatever modality they access they'll stick with that one. Different implications sometimes around safety; It can be easier for a young person to write in, send a quick message on the web. They may be in a situation where typing something sort of in silence will enable them to get the support that they need whereas somebody else may want something where they can hear a counselor's voice. Both phone counseling and online counseling have a particular following. Young people,

we've gotten feedback that they do cross over but for the most part appreciate having the options.

I moved from counseling into the current position. The title is clinical practice specialist, my role being really focused on supporting counselors now in their work. So that might be like a one on one meeting with counselors looking at clinical skills, maybe unpacking sessions, taking a look at the directions that we took in counseling sessions and how we best worked with and served the client, maybe alternative directions we could have taken as well. Those are always important to explore. Another piece is creating and delivering, facilitating clinical workshops and trainings for the team. We may sit with the director and look at needs for the department, also really important for us to hear from the counselors what they would feel would be supportive so we may look at a particular topic or an area of focus, say bullying or addictions or trauma and then formulate a workshop, something that will support our counselors in their work. Another piece is working with the different departments in the organization. There's lots of media outreach. We have clinical materials for the counselors both online, lots of websites and tip sheets they can access in their work, and then some manuals and hard copy things that we look at. My team is involved in drafting those and revising, again according to the needs of the counseling team.

The focus of my work is looking at how a counselor may learn, may want to explore a subject. A lot of my job is looking at service and sort of the end conversation and how we're doing in that area, and then if we're not quite there for whatever reason, could be development, maybe we didn't go in this direction and that's OK, how do we go from where we're at to some of the areas that we could be and that might be understanding the learning style of a counselor, how to collaborate with them, how to offer ideas and still honour the counselors particular working style, their voice, their language, that's a neat part of the work.

The rewards: many, in lots of different ways. Certainly hearing feedback from counselors that they feel supported, that there's an environment where they feel they can bring anything forward, debriefs in an area that they want to focus on, an open relationship is how I hear a reward and then of course from young people. Feedback is interesting in a single session context that is anonymous, but we do get 'thank you' messages that'll come in. "Please send such and such counselor a thank you for a conversation that was really helpful". Sometimes that can even sound like "this person helped save my life". Sometimes we'll have service users come back years later and talk about the relationship they had with the service, how it impacted their life and that's beyond any thank you I could ask for. When you hear those words and when you hear



that sentiment and you read a letter to a counselor that says that, I don't think there are words but just happy we could be there.

Being a social worker means having a way to make a contribution. Giving back to participating in a greater vision. Something that involves social justice, community, agency. Relationship is everything, in lots of different ways. Certainly in my one on one work in a coaching capacity it's paramount, in connections with clients, counseling sessions for sure and it's that key ingredient certainly in therapeutic relationships. It opens doors.

If there is a consideration and a curiosity I'm in the camp of perhaps give it a go. Taking on a course of study will always be an enriching experience wherever the path takes an individual. Maybe they continue on with social work, maybe they take another path that fits with social work, the perspective that one gets from it is certainly helpful. So if there is a curiosity and a wondering I would encourage someone to continue pulling that thread and see where it leads them.

That I don't know what's going to happen next. That gets me excited about work. Hearing how a difference has been made in a young person's life. Knowing that I am involved in a project and an organization that is meeting the needs of young people as they've expressed them is important and exciting to me. It's never hard to get up in the morning. There's never a day that I don't want to go in.

**Outro** - This is Dean Faye Mishna from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. 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)