

Evidence-Informed Mental Health Social Work: Insights from the 2025 Inspiring Social Worker of the Year

with Brandon Wong, MSW

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

0:05

Hello, everybody! Welcome to season two of *The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast*. I'm your host, Dr. Barbara Lee, Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia School of Social Work, Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Services to Children and Families, and Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar.

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In this episode, the 2025 Inspiring Social Worker of the Year Award Winner, Brandon Wong, joins our podcast. Brandon Wong is a mental health social worker within the Vancouver Coastal Health authority. He reflects on his journey from a health sciences background in Australia to frontline social work in complex mental health and substance use settings in Vancouver's Downtown East Side in Canada. He shares what drew him to social work practice, why social workers are essential within interdisciplinary health teams, and his experience and insights of engaging in evidence-informed practice and knowledge exchange within healthcare. He further reflects on what it means to be named Inspiring Social Worker of the Year and co-authoring an award-winning article in the *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity and Social Work*. Brandon's insights help foster a greater understanding of how social work research can be used to inform best practice, both currently and in the future.

Dr. Barbara Lee

1:23

So, Brandon, tell us a bit about your social work journey. What brought you into the field and continues to inspire your work today?

Brandon Wong

1:30

So, I think what brought me into the field originally was, uh, well I started off my educational journey in Australia. So, I'm originally from Australia. I did a Bachelor of Health Sciences, to start with, and found like when I graduated that I was not too sure at the time what I wanted to pivot into or what I wanted to go into. I sort of like worked a little bit in Australia, just, in healthcare, but not in like a patient support giving role or anything like that, just in administration while I was trying to figure out what exactly I wanted to do. And then I felt like I did kind of like the patient interaction that I did get and interaction with people that I got; I sort of enjoyed that.

2:17

Then from there I started looking into fields I wanted to go into. So, I was looking into different areas of healthcare. I was looking into nursing, looking into occupational therapy as well. And then I, think I ended up settling on social work more so because I felt like I wanted something that was directly related to like working with people, in like that, one-to-one aspect and seeing how I could best support people, getting to where they wanted to be and how I could sort of help them. When



I was doing my Bachelor degree, a focus of it was public health and health promotion. So, I guess as well, when I thought about that, social work seemed like the most logical pathway to take.

3:03

And then I guess what inspires the work and like what, makes me keep going in the field today is, probably I do feel like there is a lot of reward you get from working with people. I do feel as well, like I really enjoy the specialty I'm in, working in mental health. I think it's a vital area for social workers to be working in and well-versed in. Because what we see today with a lot more like mental health sort of illnesses and things like that coming up being more prevalent and people definitely needing support in that area and support that comes from like a multifaceted lens, not just from like psychiatry or from like healthcare, from nursing and whatnot, like having social work be a part of that as well I think is really important 'cause having worked with interdisciplinary teams, I've found that having people from all different aspects and all different areas of healthcare really improves overall experiences for like the patients, and for people overall that engage in, any mental health or healthcare services at all.

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I feel like those are the main sort of things like that got me into the field originally and then keep me wanting to stay in the field and working in the field. And I think, uh as well, just to add to that, I do feel like it's important and like rewarding and nice to see when you're able to, work with people that are just trying to seek out mental health services and you're able to sort of guide them in the right way and help them to seek out the correct services and resources that can help improve their general life and functioning.

Dr. Barbara Lee

4:49

Yeah. And just recently you were awarded Inspiring Social Worker of the Year, because of your work. And so, what did that recognition mean to you personally and professionally?

Brandon Wong

5:00

Honestly it meant a lot because I guess both personally and professionally, it's not uh, sort of like every day that you are able to be awarded something like that. So, it was definitely a huge shock 'cause I didn't expect to be awarded it. I was really thankful that I had some colleagues that nominated me and I was very appreciative of that. And then to hear that I was awarded, that was sort of surreal. I didn't expect it at all. It feels good to be like recognized because, I feel like healthcare like a lot of other high pressure, high stress, places and fields of work, a lot of the time, like you're, you're doing as much as you possibly can and you don't always get recognized for that work because like it is just as busy and at times I feel like there's not as much time to like actually sit back and think about the things that you do or think about the things that your colleagues do, and actually tell them that they're doing a good job and tell 'em that they're doing well. So I also do feel like it also served as like a reminder for myself to always be, I guess, like appreciative of the colleagues that I work with too, and like let them know when they're doing a good job.



6:14

Because yeah, often it's like sort of any job at the end of the day at times where it's like becomes very task oriented, very, like you need to get things done and you can definitely forget those sort of like more, I guess, supportive parts of the role where it does feel like comforting and it does feel rewarding when someone tells you you're doing a good job and you're acknowledged for it. Yeah, it meant a lot and it was a huge sort of like shock at the start and then just something that I felt yeah, really appreciative of.

Dr. Barbara Lee**6:49**

And our podcast is really about knowledge exchange and knowledge mobilization. And so, I'm curious, what does evidence informed policy and practice mean to you in a social work context?

Brandon Wong**7:00**

Yeah, so I had a think about this sort of topic and, uh, think a lot about evidence informed, sort of like practice overall and going back to when I was studying in university, I feel like it was obviously like a lot easier to be informed and up to date with peer reviewed research, peer reviewed knowledge, and like whatever topics that you are looking into or you wanna specialize in, because during like our master's program, like it's a huge part of it. Like when you're doing readings, when you're writing your papers and things like that, you have to engage with like evidence informed and peer reviewed articles and research. I think the more I thought about coming into the field, especially working at frontline, it's something that you have to be consciously aware of and something that you have to consciously seek out, I feel, if you want to stay up to date in those areas. 'Cause I feel like the things that keep you accountable to it are like the social work college wanting you to be able to continue with like their continuing education and logging, things like that.

8:16

So, from my experience at Vancouver Coastal Health and where I work, there is opportunities to attend like webinars and attend educational series and things like that. But a lot of the time it's not something that I've found that's required or mandatory. It's something that can be easily missed or easily overlooked, like once you've finished formal education. So, in practice, I really think that it's remembering that there's a reason why when we're doing our schooling and doing our education, why we are looking at peer reviewed research, and looking at peer reviewed articles and systematic reviews and all of those to inform our practice. Because then once you get into the field, you're focusing so much on the tasks that you have at hand. So I think, in like context, I feel like it's something that you have to be consciously aware of, really.

Dr. Barbara Lee**9:13**

And I think, you know, especially in social work when there's values of equity and social justice, access to information helps to empower people. And so, I'm just wondering how do we ensure that the evidence informing our work is also equitable?

Brandon Wong**9:30**

I think it's comes down to as well when we're looking to ensure that our work is equitable and the evidence is equitable, looking at which populations of which groups have been studied when



you're looking at research papers and then trying to ensure that the voice of the people that we work with are also included. And trying to look into research that is looking at a wide range of people that you're working with. As well, like if that's not available, then at least being aware of that, 'cause a lot of the times I do feel like that is overlooked. Like even when going over research papers and research that's been done, when you're looking at the actual demographics of the research subjects and the people that are involved in that, we do tend to overlook who are the people that are being researched and looked at and at times that can not include marginalized groups.

10:27

And a lot of the times, when you are working in the field as a social worker, a lot of the people that you're gonna be working with are marginalized. So, I think that ensuring that you are actually aware of when you are looking at research, you're aware of which populations are being studied is quite important. And then also as much as possible, trying to seek out studies and seek out research and evidence that is inclusive of the people that you're working with. I find that important and I find that it's something that you also have to consciously look for. So, I think, yeah, that would be how I would wanna see it be as equitable as possible.

Dr. Barbara Lee**11:08**

I think that's the thing is like, as a practitioner, you're saying that you need to make those efforts to look for that research and the evidence to inform your work. And how do you see knowledge being shared in exchange and mobilized in your area of practice?

Brandon Wong**11:24**

That's a good question 'cause I feel like at times, I felt that it's like there needs to be more of it. I feel like in terms of knowledge being exchanged and especially taking into consideration, wanting to keep people up to date and inclusive of the newer sort of research being done and peer reviewed research being done. I think from my own experience, I do wish it was something that was more included within your workplace, and included within like workplace seminars for example, or if you're having like monthly meetings or you are having like discussions with your team there and then you're trying to work with different cases that are coming up with different clients you're working with — actually trying to include and see what current best practice is 'cause I feel like a lot of the time, it's not that it's not accessible, but it's not brought up, as much as like you would say, for example, when you're in school and you've got a topic that you're researching and you're working in a group project, and then you have people bringing in research papers and their own things that they've found and their findings. It's just something that I've not seen as much, in actual healthcare practice. I think that's due to a number of reasons because it is quite fast paced and at times it does get overlooked.

12:44

And the things that are more looked into are general case discussions and then you're seeing like different stakeholders on the team want and whatnot. So, the way I would see it being like, I guess improved is that it becomes something that is systematically included within caseload reviews or within like overall patient care reviews and things like that. And people are made aware that we're



doing certain things because this is what newer research is showing is best practice in this area. So, I was looking over, 'cause a lot of the patients that I currently work with, we have a lot of clients that are diagnosed with schizophrenia, or other psychotic disorders.

13:27

And in terms of best practice, or at least from what I've seen in some of the more recent research is of course, we're including pharmacological sort of interventions and whatnot to support with that. But it's like the additional psychosocial supports that have shown to support a lot. So, supporting clients with supports within the community and how they can integrate into whether their goal is to go back into education or schooling or into the workforce or something like that. Having access to and supporting with those sides of their treatment as well. And I find that things like that are more difficult to see, or at least promote within the current healthcare system that we work in just due to workload constraints, resource constraints and then a lot of the time, because the number one focus is through a sort of like medicalized model where the first sort of line of treatment is the medication, which is very important and absolutely should be. But then it's like the secondary things that are coming in that especially social workers can be supporting with, like psychosocial supports, are not as easily implemented.

Dr. Barbara Lee

14:44

And you shared a little bit about how to be able to bridge that knowledge gap from research to practice. Is there any other ideas that you wanna offer to facilitate that knowledge exchange and mobilization into, into practice?

Brandon Wong

14:58

I think that to actually shift it in I think it would be dependent on where you're working and what sort of work you're doing. From my own experience, I think that a great way to be able to do that would be through more like simpler ways through like presentations and things like that, but have presentations scheduled in, as something that we're consciously doing. 'Cause I think that without that, it's just stuff that can easily be brushed over because maybe it's just not seen as important as completing another task or something like that. So that's how I think it should be introduced and more than an email or something like that's sort of like presenting some sort of findings or like just like giving like suggested readings. Because I do find once you're, busy with work or busy with other things if you're getting like an email, you're not always gonna pay full attention to it or look into it and read into it unless it's something that you're very interested in. So, I would like to see things like that more as a way to reinforce and implement like evidence informed practice.

Dr. Barbara Lee

16:07

And just around like evidence informed practice you had talked about peer reviewed journals, and you've been part of knowledge production in terms of receiving the Best Manuscript Award for a peer reviewed article in the Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity and Social Work. So, can you tell us a bit about that research and what was it like for you as a practitioner engaged in this scholarly work?



Brandon Wong**16:33**

Yeah, it was a little while ago now and that was a, yeah, so it was a paper that myself and, uh, Dr. Shirley Chau who teaches at UBCO, the social work program there. We wrote together about mixed race people and their experience within social work and the research in the social work field, specifically about that. I guess putting together that paper and like, I learned so much, just overall about the actual peer reviewed process and how rigorous it is, and how actually strenuous it is to be able to get something published into an article 'cause I think a lot of people who, a lot, especially like a lot of the time when you're reading peer reviewed articles, you don't really actually think about the extent of how much work the author and the authors have put into putting it all together, because you're just reading it and you've got a whole bunch of them and you're kind of just like, need to read them all.

17:35

But yeah, it really taught me a lot because not only did Shirley help me a lot with actually putting it together, but then you send it off and you have other academics read it and go through it and give you critiques as well, which makes it, it's like add a whole 'nother level to it because then you're seeing what suggestions and what changes they're requesting and you're going through that and then needing to change things. You need to add more research to it, or you needing to take certain things out, which I found it quite challenging, but it was something that was also really rewarding. Also, it was something that I would not have expected to win an award or anything like that. It actually came completely out of random when Shirley told me that we won that award because I had not like checked my alumni email for a little bit, and then she asked me if I'd checked my email, and I was like, oh no, like what's this? So, I had a look, and then it said that we'd won. And at first I was like, oh, I hope this isn't some sort of scam or something. But yeah, that was also a crazy experience. I couldn't believe it. And yeah, receiving that award at one of the social work, the N-S-A-S-W?

Dr. Barbara Lee**18:53**

The Council of Social Work Education.

Brandon Wong**18:54**

Yes, yes. That was in Atlanta. So, we traveled there and that was a really cool experience as well getting to meet all the people that were on that journal's board and editors and stuff. I guess because part of that paper I wrote while I was in school, but then a large part of it as well was while I was like working in the field too. So I do think, being able to continue to write it while also working, I guess, mostly kept that sort of like, I wanna say like academic sort of like mindset and thought process sharp in a way 'cause I do feel like when you've not needed to write papers or read peer reviewed papers or things like that for a while, it's like you need to refresh yourself and get back into it. So, I did find that it also made me really like value research and education and overall literature reviews a lot more. Just 'cause I had seen the amount and the extent of work that I had to really put into it. So then going through and seeing other literature reviews and reading other literature reviews makes me really feel a sense of understanding of how much work these other authors have also put into it.



Dr. Barbara Lee**20:10**

And it is a very rigorous process, first to engage in research, but then, for peer reviewed publication. And so, for social workers, I'm just curious of your thoughts and how social workers can play not just in using evidence, but also how they can participate in the creation and perhaps dissemination of research.

Brandon Wong**20:33**

Yeah. I think that in terms of the creation of it, being active within education in some ways will be able to add to that. So, I feel like there has been a couple of calls for social workers to discuss and give their experiences and things like that. So, I think that side of it's really important. Like if there are like calls for research, calls for participants that are asking for social workers' experiences, whether that's from like Master's students that are writing papers and theses or PhD students, being aware and being available to actually give insights because if you're a frontline worker, then you're really seeing everything and you're getting that full experience of whatever field that you're in. And if you are not, but I mean if you're able to share it with people that are doing research, then I think that it can really add to that and it's quite valuable.

21:29

I know that there is other ways that you can try and keep active in research and actually maybe trying continue with doing literature reviews or trying to add to blogs or things like that too. But I also find that for myself and for a lot of people, it's quite challenging when you're working full-time and trying to play, like, not try and like, yeah, keep, like in touch with that and doing that too. I think it can be really challenging. But I think that for me at least, what I've found aside from writing that paper, but also being available and open to being a research participant, whether that's specifically to social work research or overall healthcare workers research or maybe like people are looking for discussions with practitioners that are people of color or things like that. All of those things are very valuable and I think that they can provide insights and support education and access to research and peer reviewed and evidence-based practice.

Dr. Barbara Lee**22:35**

Thanks. So looking ahead, what gives you hope about the direction social work is heading? Particularly in how we use and share knowledge?

Brandon Wong**22:44**

I think the main thing that gives me the most hope is seeing more access to open access journals, and also seeing more overall access, through the health authorities and also through universities, of being able to get access to peer reviewed articles. I know that even just in the past, I found it a lot more difficult to get access to that once, like I'd completed school. But I've started to notice that there are a lot more open access journals and open access articles as well just from doing my own looking into different articles regardless of the field. I have seen a lot in the medical area, and healthcare area, which is quite good because I do feel like for social workers, especially social workers that are working in healthcare, if they do find topics of interest that they wanna look more into and it is open access, then that really gives me hope that you're gonna be able to end up in the future accessing more.



23:48

I think that as well as that further things that sort of give me hope in this field is like seeing like social workers expanding their level of knowledge, so seeing more social workers that are comfortable working with complex mental health. I find that to be really nice and cool to see when like I'm working in different areas of mental health because I feel that maybe prior or even when I was in school, I found a lot of like social work was not siloed exactly, but it was very much focused around like very specific areas in healthcare. Whether it was like discharge planning specifically or if it was in like child protection, it was child protection specifically.

24:31

But now seeing more and more social workers working on specialized mental health teams, and specialized crisis response teams is a really cool thing. And I think that social workers can do a great job in that and provide a lot of valuable insights and also provide that different lens that isn't just specifically medical or just specifically like psychiatric from a mental health perspective. But it's also, like I said prior, taking into consideration the whole sort of like psychosocial picture, which is, which is really important 'cause I do think the focus on psychosocial and even if we're looking with clients and people that struggling with poverty and things like that, like seeing if certain psychosocial factors are improved, then seeing that also improve their mental health is something that is huge.

25:23

I think social workers almost will have an advantage in because it's something that we're always gonna be more like aware of. I feel like there's like, of course there's always gonna be room for growth, in the social work field. And I can see it growing and I hope it continues that way and continues to expand and help the clients and populations that we serve and help social workers overall in working in our profession.

Dr. Barbara Lee**25:53**

So any other additional kind of reflections or words of wisdom that you wanna share?

Brandon Wong**26:01**

I just think in terms of like reflections and words, I guess, yeah. You're gonna go through times as a social worker and as a healthcare worker in this field where maybe it's stressful. It feels almost that like you're not recognized. And it's really challenging and I feel like these things are all like super normal and I feel like it can like disincentivize you or make you feel unappreciated in the field. But I think that really it's something that it's almost never personal. If you ever feel like that it's a normal sort of feeling and it's probably not because you're doing bad work or anything like that, it's just due to honestly, the system that we work in, and that we're constrained by, the amount of workload that is put onto all healthcare professionals and a lot social service professionals in general.

26:55

I think that those feelings are normal and it's stuff that shouldn't dishearten you. I think the other sort of thing is just to always try to continue to learn and learn from everyone that you work with,



including your clients, like including practitioners and people from all different areas because everyone has a different way that they do assessments, that they practice with clients, speak to clients, that they speak to other professionals. And things may resonate with you or things may not, but there's always gonna be those times where you're like, "oh, I didn't think of things like that". And it's gonna open you up to new ideas, so I think that it's just something to always be aware of and always wanting to learn more I think is super important in our field because nothing's ever gonna be completely stagnant. Things are always gonna change, improve, or maybe get worse but it's gonna be up to you to always be open to that continuous learning.

[Outro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

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