Episode 160 - Dr. Faye Mishna: It Just Crept In: The Digital Age and Its Implications for Social Work Practice

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research we're in social work. Hi from Buffalo welcome back to the spring semester. To all of our academic listeners and to 2015 for all the folks who listen to in social work let's make it a good one. I'm Peter Sobota adults in youth like rely on technologies for fun information social connections and more and more all the time personal help and advice. It's no surprise that technologies have moved into the practice of social work. In this episode our guest Dr. Faye Mishna discusses her research examining social workers experiences and how communication technology has entered their daily practice. Dr. Mishna t suggest that many social workers are navigating the implications on their own. And then when they do consult the limited research in this area they find data focused primarily on the risks involved. Dr. Mishna recommends that social workers rethink the restrictions and attempt to maximize the potential that may be there. She makes practical suggestions on managing the clinical impacts such as between session contact's boundary management and the need for practitioners to manage their own digital presence. Dr. Mishna concludes with the importance of using technology to develop cultural competence and describes her next steps for her research and practice implications. Dr. Faye Mishnah is professor and dean at the factor Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto.

[00:02:08] She holds a Margaret and Wallace McCain family chair in Child and Family Doctor Mishna as research is focused on bullying cyber abuse and bullying and school focused interventions for students with learning disabilities. Her scholarly publications have focused on bullying social work education and clinical practice. Dr. Mishna was interviewed by our own self described technology nerd Dr. Nancy Smyth dean and professor here at the School of Social Work. Dr. Smyth interviewed Dr. Mishna in September of 2014 Hi my name is Nancy Smyth and I'm the dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work and I'm excited that today I have a chance here to interview Professor Faye Mishna who is the dean at the factor Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto and she's done amazing research on a variety of topics with regard to technology and how it's interfacing and some of the work of social work. But in particular today I wanted us to talk a little bit about some of her discoveries about how technology has sort of crept into the lives of social workers. So Faye thank you so much for agreeing to come and let us interview you and also present here to our faculty and staff. Is there anything you'd like to say to people about who you are. Before we get started I don't think that fine thank you for having me. Pleased to do it. So could you tell me a little bit about sort of what you've discovered about how technology is worked into the lives of social workers.

[00:03:45] Well I guess to summarize I would say what we've discovered is that it's completely crept in and it is part of the social workers in their professional face to face work whether they have chosen it or not. And that because it's kind of happened before policies or education happened. What we're finding is that social workers themselves have had to kind of use their own practice with their own experience to figure out ways to address it and in a proactive way because initially it was just reactor. So and again this is you know small numbers it's qualitative. So we'd like to do more research. So you have to bear that caution in mind. But that's what we're finding. Can you say more about some of the ways that it's crept into people's practice. Well I would say one way it's crept in completely that everybody agrees seems to be ok is for setting appointments for administrative purposes. I think people would accept that that makes it very easy but other ways it's crept in or between sessions. Clients might have something they want to say and they haven't thought about it

or issues come up. So I think it's crept in in the sense that it now has taken on bringing in therapeutic clinical issues that even though it's not cyber counseling per se and everything that's important is because it really affects everything because it happens before thinking about whether they can get the response where the expectations confidentiality. And I think one of the things that has made myself a Marion Bogo interested in working on it is that if you look at the literature it's really very focused on the risks and the cautionary tale of what to do and what not to do.

[00:05:26] And our concern is when something is happening that pervasivley and just saying to people don't do this or don't do that or be careful about this. It's not necessarily helpful because it's not initially based on what they really do. So we think it's really important. But the positives are how it does help. And realistically what are the issues and how it can be addressed. So maybe we need to rethink some of these all these sort of restrictions that the folks who are cautioning are putting and say well clearly it's happening everywhere because it has a positive function to and how do we help people manage the positive function maximize that and also deal with whatever the limitations or uncertainties are. I think that's exactly it. And I think the one thing I would add to that is because if you look at the whole world I think the dramatic change from the ubiquitousness of the handheld device. At first it was just young kids and now everybody has that. So it's really changed the world. And so therefore change social work and things that were private are no longer private. For example public information. So everybody gone are the days when somebody and friends just don't care about my e-mail address because their e-mail address is accessible to find it. Yes. And everybody now has an e-mail address right. Are ninety nine point nine percent. So it really is saying you know we're in a new world now and this is a digital world and it doesn't mean we have to give up all boundaries or anything at all but we have to adjust it accordingly. OK.

[00:06:48] Now the ways in which it's creeping in maybe as you said starts with things like confirming an appointment or changing an appointment. And these typically happen through what technologies e-mail texting. I would say first it was e-mail but as things change as more and more are happening through texting I would say both with young kids is texting. Yes yes. Yeah. And then parents who have kids start to get into texting because they know they need to do that. Exactly. OK. So after appointments you know are sort of confirming things. How does it start to leak into other areas. What are the ways in which practitioners were describing how the boundaries started to shift. They would describe different ways one way would be just by the way and the by the way could be therapeutic issue or could be a crisis for some therapist for example. But being out for dinner on a Friday evening and she worked in a school board and she got a text from a teenage boy saying he wanted to kill himself. This was a Friday evening and he wasn't telling anybody. So she had to really kind of decide what to do because it raises the questions you've got the text she ended up calling the dad and doing an intervention. But those are the kinds of ways that it comes in. Other examples would be. That's interesting is in couples therapy because traditionally in couples therapy the clinician has been able to say anything you say to me outside of here I'll bring back in here.

[00:08:07] It won't be secret but because it can happen so quickly by text or e-mail they might forget to say it and may forget to brand and become the kind of thing that will happen to somebody. One person talked about the husband sending the clinician a picture of the mess of the House how messy he felt that needed to get addressed and he sent that to her privately. So that's the kind of. OK. Oh yes that was it definitely has an effect. So as you're talking about this I'm thinking of some of my clinical work. When I first got into doing technology with clients and it was actually our client who wanted me to read her journal and I've had clients do journaling and they bring it into the sessions. But she did hers online in a blogging service at that point called Life journal which I've never heard of. And so I sort of had to get into that to figure it out and read her journal. And that was sort of the start of my slippery slope. Because technology was very much a part of her life and then texting for appointments and things like that. But I remember having conversations with her when she would send an email of something saying you know this is fine but you need to know I

may not respond this amount of time 24 hours or more on the weekends longer so that if it's a crisis I want you to call me.

[00:09:19] And she had some boundary issues herself and we talked about the fact that those are things that would probably be tested and they were and if it was good we had talked about it and set the boundaries up and then this person long after we stopped working together gave me permission to start to talk about what it felt like when she started linking up with other therapists who were still very traditional. You could only contact them through their answering service or through their voicemail and it was always you call them of course they're never available then because they're seeing people and then it's them calling back and how triggering that felt for her of her trauma history and her parents who were not accessible and abandoned her and that she hadn't realized that having the option to use technology in a way to change even the appointment felt less triggering and more empowering to her. And I had never thought about these shifts that way but it makes perfect sense. It totally does. And for me that's a real evidence of what we're saying that we have to understand the meaning because in this case it actually had meaning. It is so positive. So the question was How do you make room for that but also do it in a way that addresses the boundaries and also takes into account the needs and the limitations of that question. Exactly. And in talking to her about that she gave me permission to talk about this because of people needing to understand that it has important clinical meaning exactly for clients and that I think there's lessons for us to learn there and that isn't what you hear people talking about when everything's about the risks and the dangers and the sort of fear level that gets generated that's our real positives there. I think an important piece the what the meaning is and it also raises the whole issue because essentially we always target but start with the client.

[00:11:02] Yes. And if the client happens to be now wanting to use technology we can't discount it. We're not sure how we have to address it but we have to take that into account. Yeah I do think that's really why I got in was my clients were bringing it up so I said well I guess I need to learn about this and then you sort of follow their lead. I don't ask them to teach me about it but I say OK here's what this person is mentioning I need to go and look at it. And that was how I got interested in virtual worlds as well I had a client who was doing a lot there and had issues with trauma and dissociation I thought you know I need to understand what this is because I don't even know how to help her with boundaries and what all of this means to her if I don't even understand that. But I think at a time now in our culture where so many adults even are using all of these tools if we're not able to have those conversations I start to be concerned about our cultural competence and especially with young people which is a new area. You've sort of looked up to in terms of how people can use these tools with young folks. So what do you think we need to start doing as we're educating social workers whether they be in schools or our peers who are out in the profession. I think that's a great great time. I think the first thing we have to do.

[00:12:11] We're doing a little survey we're finding out not many schools are including it and often people talk about cyber we were charging what they mean online therapy. And so we're not argument that because there's lots of research out there's lots of literature on that and there's a whole set kind of way of doing it. But I think we need to start realizing that we need to educate both students and professionals on how to use and work with technology when they're doing face to face because they aren't even aware of it. And so I think about students who say they're in a 20s and they're very familiar with it personally. And then they get a job and all of a sudden they have clients responding to them with their personal experience isn't going to be enough. Right. Really need to understand how to address it and what we found in our research when we went back and reinterview the more experienced practitioners three years later they had come a long way because they now were becoming more proactive in what you were doing initially they were just kind of responding not know what to do or just not going to do. But now what they were doing is starting off with the beginning of sessions when people often contact people or talk about limits to

competition. At that time they'll talk about when it comes to cyber this where you can expect if you send me an e-mail. This is when I'll respond but they're also saying they realize they have to revisit them many times. Some people feel that kind of thing. So these are experienced practitioners and it's one thing to have experienced practitioners do that on their own.

[00:13:34] It's not great but young new ones should not be having to figure that out on their own. So we really need to include that in education and for continuing education in my community to have it in there. And I think in a way that lets people talk about it reminds me again of when I was a student. The message would be don't continue with clients afterwards. Period. And it can often shut it down. So people continued I remember that it happened to classes people would consider us in the classroom that they actually had continued afterwards that they could go to their supervisor because they were told not to. So I think we need to do the same with us. We need to not just have a go underground we need to make space for practitioners talk about including issues that come up problematic because it's going to happen whether they do something that they're not thinking about or just happened. So I think that's really critical to make space for that and that's not easy to do. Yeah yeah. And that within agencies that means the supervisors need to be thinking about this now and the administrators and the administrators as well. When you say that we were told early don't continue with clients meaning don't extend the session beyond knowing did after they terminated no terminate. Yes. Right. And remember for me an example when I was teaching one of my courses practice class some of the students end up confessing crimes and confessions about how they had continued but they hadn't been able to tell their supervisors.

[00:14:58] It made me realize that when I was clinical director of an agency and we had a treatment camp at the end of the camp sometimes the social work students and other students would come to me and say they felt so connected to a particular kid can they stay in touch with them. And I had done the same thing I said you just can't and we will. Don't worry. And I left it at that. And then years later when they retire on a bench or some of those continued and got into trouble and didn't come and tell me because because they went against the rule and I just left you just closed it down by saying you can't do that rather than you can't do it don't do it. But. So the question is how do you keep a rule not condone it but not close down. Right. I think we really need to have technology especially because it's new now and it's happening. It's sort of we can't just come up with policies and guidelines so we really need to grapple with as we're grappling with that we have to be able to have room for that. And yet being aware of ethical issues for a while ago I was struck as I was looking over your article about this research about someone who talked about Facebook and what does it mean to get a request from a former client to be a friend on Facebook and their concerns because they use Facebook personally.

[00:16:09] And I think those are the sort of dilemmas and I know colleagues who've actually set up two Facebook accounts which is actually in violation of Facebook's terms of service but they do it they set one up for their professional practice where they post information about you know mental health issues or things that would be of interest to everybody and they'll follow whoever comes. And then the personal that they use for their personal life. But I think those are the dilemmas that start to arise. And then of course what happens when someone starts leaving on your wall something that's private but it isn't private because anybody who's the friend can see it. Maybe you have to set it up so people can;t post something on your site or it's got to be reviewed. So I think those or tagging pictures of you. Exactly. Yeah. So those are definitely sort of tricky issues. On the other hand I'm aware that there are people who are within the foster care system folks as they're aging out there using Facebook and these tools to stay connected exactly and trying to find ways to do that is much easier than trying to track down where people's e-mails or their lives have moved. But sort of struggling for how do you make those boundaries so you're not outing a kid as a former foster kid. So it is about I think having that dialogue about how to use these tools and experimenting to see what works. But that means we have to understand the tools and I mean at a very deep level

it's not just like I set up a Facebook account. I have to understand the privacy settings I think you're absolutely right. And we don't. Another example of Skype a lot of social workers use Skype. They don't understand that that's against HIPPA It's not a compliant compliant.

[00:17:39] And also Skype makes it very clear that they recorded and I know some people have said when I present exhibits as clinicians that if they were asked their clients and their clients given consent for them we talked about informed consent before that really informed consent. If you feel like you're far away any just here are saying you should have some contact are you going to say no I'm not going to do it right. And it turns out there are hyper compliant services you can use exactly but I see most people who are doing even supplemental sessions are doing them via Skype. Yes. And clinically that's not something that I would do and it is about informed consent because it may sound fine on the face of it and what happens when that recording then is viewed by the police who were looking at a variety of activities or is that really what you want to have happen. Exactly. But I think that that's part of the problem with informed consent is that we don't understand the implications of this right. We have a wonderful Google Plus community and social work and technology and one of the people there who actually has running the other major social or podcasts Jonathan Singer talked about did a post there about how he flicker has photos and you can allow people to share them and see them. And one day he is moving along on the web and doesn't he see a photo of his family in an advertisement. And then he realized the way he had set the permissions up allowed for that and he had never considered what would it be like to come across something like that.

[00:19:02] And so then he went and changed his permissions. But here's someone who is incredibly technology savvy but hadn't thought about all the what ifs and I think that's part of the problem with the informed consent thing. And then when you think about what we're being taught and what we're teaching that we're not doing really not. Now I don't think we've realized the implications of it. Now let me ask you one of the things I saw in your article where people talking to about former clients writing bad things about agency and that they didn't really have a sense for how to deal with that. Did you see that come up a few times or just a couple of times. What was interesting is when it came out that was the one that we talked about in the article was a very small agency that really seasoned some very social justice and they really aren't. So what was so startling for them is to see how vulnerable they can be as an agency and it's come up about this too. And it's interesting. You know there's no way to take that stuff down if it's libelous. But the issue is not off it it's one person's perspective that's what it is and it is one person's perspective and it just keeps coming. Right. So one of the ways that Mike Langoys who has done a lot of considering about you know sort of how technology works into therapy one of the things he blogged about was if there's negative stuff out on the internet about you the solution is to create positive stuff to put your own presence out there.

[00:20:23] Most people don't search beyond the first page or two in Google. Right. But if you're not putting out sort of positive things and you know not so much stuff about your clients but articles about that are educational and that sort of inform the public and talk about the sorts of things that are of concern to everybody. Then your name comes up with those. Right. So it is about sort of getting hold of your digital presence in some ways. And again I'm not sure that we've done a lot of thinking about that. I think you're right we haven't. I think that's true. So are there particular ways in educating professionals or students that you found were more successful as you started to talk to colleagues and people about this. That's kind of our next step to talk about what would be important in terms of educating because we have not really been focusing on that and I think we're focusing more on a creeping. But as I've realized it's very corrupt and that's when we realize you know nothing and when we really have to be teaching students. So I don't really know the answer to that except that I think we need to do it in a way that's how that doesn't close down a conversation. But it's sort of recognisance that there are many benefits in maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks. Yeah I mean that will be the challenge and I haven't seen enough leadership from our

professional organizations on this. People have been mostly focused on the risk management. Exactly.

[00:21:42] It's a place where it makes sense when you think about practice courses right and they talk about the ecological perspective or role plays in your. I mean that's really where it makes sense to bring it in. It doesn't have to come in in a big work environment doesn't come in in a big way. I know that when we think about the ecological context it's also the meaning of the cyber world for the client. Yes. So that could be brought into practice. Example I think that would be very seamless would be very relevant for students and I think a good way to begin thinking about it. Well thank you. I think that's good food for thought and I'm excited to see how we can start to uncover some of the balanced ways to address these things and excited to see where things will next go. I know you're planning to follow up on this research. You won't say anything about what you're. Well yes what I'm planning to do is we're reading your proposal. And the third thing is some of the stuff that you talked about so that we're we want to look at how information communication technologies are used from the perspective of Social Workers clients and administrators of agencies diverse agencies why don't you kind of get a sense of how would you. How does that come in the questions you were saying. How does it come in how does it get used when what is that like. And then this evening we really want to look at is what is the meaning of it. So the example you gave. I know some that I have worked with.

[00:23:01] The meeting was at once she felt she had access felt similar in a way it triggered and it made her feel very special. Yes which felt too overwhelming actually might say that needed to be processed quickly. So we think it's very important to understand the meaning because in order to come up with guidelines and best practices you really have to understand the meaning for their clients and also what that means for their fans. For example one of our studies we found that according to some of the comments it felt almost like a holding environment when you're talking about journalism they talked about feeling that when they wrote something that was similar to journalling and they sent it to the clinician but that it was interactive and once they knew the clinician had it even though they weren't going to read it for a week or so they felt supported it contained secure relaxed. So we was almost like provided a holding environment for them but then the flip side of that is what does that mean for the clinician. How do they feel. So we need to understand both. So that's the second thing. And then what we'd like to do is out of that kind of look at the policies of those agencies and to start to come up with best practices and guidelines that can inform practice and education that can begin to in a way that takes those two things to account. So that's what we're looking at. Oh that's exciting yeah. I can't wait to have that study done. Well thanks a lot. And I look forward to seeing how this research thread continues because it's there's really lots of dialogue about these things but not much research.

[00:24:28] So it's exciting to have your work and to see it continuing. Thank you. Thanks. You've been listening to Dr. Faye Mishna discuss the digital age and the implications for social practice and in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.