The pros and cons of being a young social worker

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Hello, and welcome to the Social Work Community podcast by Community Care. This podcast is where social workers come to discuss the key issues affecting their profession. You'll hear direct from social workers in your community about their successes and their challenges. Whether you're a student or an experienced social worker, whether you're frontline or management, this podcast is for you. Join the conversation and be part of our social work community. You can go to www.thesocialworkcommunity.com to sign up for free.

I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, a careers editor here at Community Care, and in this episode we're going to be talking about the pros and cons of being a young social worker. Many of you may have started a job in social work straight out of university and that can have its challenges with people you might be working with. We usually think of ageism with respect to older people. However, this isn't always the case. Looking young and being young can sometimes affect how people view you as a professional.

To explore this subject, we have Elizabeth Glandfield and Omar Mohamed joining me today. Elizabeth is 23 and completed her ASYE last year. She's a frontline children's and family social worker with a focus on child protection. Omar is 22, also a children and family social worker who does some lecturing and is involved in research around the decolonisation of social work. He also has lived experience of social services.

Welcome to the both of you. Thank you so much for coming on the Social Work Community podcast. How are you both doing today? [0:01:38.2]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Hi. I'm good, thank you.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Have you had times you've not been taken seriously as a social worker because of how old you are or how old you look? [0:01:46.7]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah, there's been plenty of times. I've had it…I had it a lot more once I started. I had things such as, 'You look thirteen,' 'Do you have children?' but I also had it from professionals as well, in meetings with families. So that was quite undermining. But now I've sort of been able…because I've reflected on it I've been able to approach it in a different way. But it's definitely been a challenge.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay. And Omar, hello. Welcome to the podcast. [0:02:20.9]

Omar Mohamed: Hiya. Thanks.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Have you had a similar experience where people have thought you're too young to be a social worker? [0:02:27.8]

Omar Mohamed: Yeah, I think definitely a similar experience to Elizabeth, unfortunately. So I've definitely been questioned on the experience that I've had and whether I know what I'm doing. Not by professionals yet, but definitely but some of the families that I work with, in particular parents. I think a lot of parents are…they're questioning whether I can help them with certain things, like parenting skills, as they automatically assume that I have no knowledge in that 'cause I'm too young to have knowledge in that. So yeah, it can be a bit of a barrier in practice.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And how has that made you feel, when somebody has said to you, 'You look too young, what would you know?' Were you taken aback by it? [0:03:14.4]

Omar Mohamed: I think for me, yeah, definitely taken aback. And I think because it creates an automatic barrier, I think it then makes me feel that, you know, how am I going to build this relationship, how am I going to be able to do some good social work, yeah. Because there's already a kind of barrier from the get-go.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Elizabeth, how have you felt when that's happened to you? [0:03:39.1]

Elizabeth Glandfield: It felt quite hurtful to begin with, but I also reflected on it after and thought, 'Have they asked me because they want to change the conversation or have they asked me 'cause they're genuinely interested in how old am I?' And I've had people before say, 'Oh, how long does it take to get the degree? How long's the training?' So maybe they are interested but maybe on the other hand they just don't want to work with you because of how you look.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay. And how has this kind of ageism played out with your colleagues? Have you told your colleagues? Have you discussed it? Is it something that happens regularly or just the one-off? 'Cause you both…okay, this is an audio podcast but I can vouch that yes, you two do look your age and could pass for much younger as well. Which is a great thing in most circumstances. [0:04:30.3]

Elizabeth Glandfield: I've had it where I've been able to talk to my colleagues about it in supervision and also team meetings, but also in my ASYE, sort of talking to younger social workers but also older social workers as well, and how they've approached the situation to sort of then see how I can then approach it.

Omar Mohamed: I talk about age quite a lot with my colleagues, I think. I think it's a kind of running joke that myself, and actually I have another colleague who is also my age – we're only a few days' apart really – and so we're nicknamed the kind of babies, you know, of the office. You know, we are the youngest, whereas a lot of the other social workers in our team are much more experienced, are much more of an age. And yeah, that comes with a lot more wisdom. But then I also think it's also interesting 'cause when we talk about our age, you know, we're also putting a lot of kind of fresh ideas to our team. And we kind of know some of those issues that younger people are facing as well and that older workers might not always be kind of up-to-date with.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah, so that was going to be my next question. Of course, being young, looking young certainly has lots of advantages, and especially if you're working with young people and children. So, there must be lots of things that work in your favour when you're working with kids. Anything spring to mind that's helped you?

Elizabeth Glandfield: The language I use when I'm working with adolescents. I have noticed that adolescents do seem to get on much better with me than older parents do. And also the social media apps that they use, such as, like, SnapChat, BeReal, I know all about that. So then when I talk to them about that, they're like, 'Oh, she knows loads about this.' Whereas when I talk to parents about it, and to safeguard their own children, they're like, 'Oh, I didn't know that.'

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So you can educate parents? [0:06:29.1]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Because I know older social workers might not necessarily know about the latest apps and what's in and what's not in. I would imagine you would be more…'cause you've literally just been a teenager not so long ago. [0:06:45.6]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah. And that's what I always say to my adolescents is, if I'm having a good conversation with them I'll say, 'You know, I'm not much older.' And that normally helps the conversation and they laugh a bit. And they open up more once you sort of use that sort of tone and that language.

Omar Mohamed: Yeah. I think for me, like, I really agree with Elizabeth. It kind of creates a level of, like, relatability. I think it kind of breaks down any barriers of like, you know, 'This social worker is some random person who's just trying to talk to me,' but actually you can come across really friendly, really relatable, and someone who is a bit more, kind of like, welcoming and that sort of thing.

I have this one boy where we've kind of got stuck in a position where we only talk in slang now. And he won't talk to me unless I talk to him in slang. I think it just becomes part of the relationship. And bringing some of that in, I think, helps to create and build relationships, especially with, yeah, children and young people.

Elizabeth Glandfield: I think using WhatsApp as well. I use that with a lot of my adolescents, one in particular, and if she's having a bad day she'll voice note me just rage, whereas older people may not know how to use WhatsApp, not know how to, like, turn it on, off, listen to it. And I always say to her, 'If you're having a bad day, you don't want to take it out on anyone else, then just send me a voice note.' And then also using emojis as well. So I know with their emojis how they're feeling and sort of have a conversation but through emojis.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah. I mean, you have to speak to people in their language and the way to connect with, especially with young people is…when I say 'language' I don't mean language as such; I mean something that they will understand, so whether it's through technology or through slang, it obviously helps. So there are certainly advantages of being younger.

You mentioned a boy that you work with, Omar. Elizabeth, do you have any stories about how you've connected with adolescents? [0:08:49.1]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah. So I've been working with one adolescent for over a year now, and at the start it was very hard. But she engaged with me straight away. I think also because I was female and younger, she sort of thought that she could open up, to the point where she'd actually told me quite openly about certain, you know, drug uses, her sexuality, what she does day to day, which built a really good relationship. And I know now, from if she does get really angry, I know sort of how to respond to it as well, whereas an older person has said to me before, like my older colleagues have said, 'How do you deal with that?' I've said, 'Well, you just sort of say I can relate, use your experiences in a professional way.' And it kind of gets them on-side a little bit as well.

Omar Mohamed: Yeah. I think just another example from me is I think I have another boy that I work with, and it's quite an interesting one because…so I work with another social worker so we're kind of co-allocated, and she's much more experienced and obviously older in age than I am. And I think the way that the boy perceives us is quite different. I think he sees the other social worker as almost like a mother-type figure, or kind of that parental or maybe authority figure, whereas I think when he sees me it's very much more, he kind of knows that Omar is okay to play basketball with him or play a bit of football and will kind of have a conversation by, yeah, playing sports together. But then also, you know, I don't think he sees Omar as the scary one or the kind of authority figure. I think it's more like a brother-type thing and more so if there's, like, an issue with his behaviour it's not me saying…or telling him off like a mother would, but more so like a brother would, and kind of advising and kind of guiding him, and also being like a bit of a role-model. So I've always found that quite interesting.

Elizabeth Glandfield: I've had a similar experience of that exact same thing. I had another worker work with my adolescent, and she'd always say to me, 'I really like her, but I can't tell her what I'm about to tell you because it's too much and I find it embarrassing because she's older.' So that always helps as well.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So that's really interesting, actually, because you would think somebody a bit later on in their career would have so much experience, and they do have so much experience, which would be really useful in other circumstances but for some, when working with teenagers and young adults, really being of a similar generation to them is…there's so many advantages. And actually, that's interesting because part of our campaign at Community Care is 'choose social work' and it's trying to get more people back into the profession or to actually choose social worker as a profession. But I don't know about yourselves, but you know how other professions, like teachers, doctors, police, all those public service jobs, you learn about in school but there's not a lot of kids will know what a social worker is because unless they've had the experience – and obviously not many kids do. So that's something I want to ask you. Why did you become a social worker? Omar, you told me earlier that you've had experience of social services. Did that play a part in your choosing the profession? [0:12:20.2]

Omar Mohamed: Yeah, it definitely played a part. So yeah, I had social workers throughout the first kind of sixteen years of my life. And whilst I personally felt that my experience of social workers was quite negative, that actually made me feel a bit more determined to want to be the difference and be a bit better than what I had experienced. So yeah, that definitely played a big part of my passion for wanting to go into social work.

And I think I was thirteen when I choose to do it. And there was a lack of information, kind of as you say. It was quite difficult to really understand what a social does if you don't experience it yourself, which is different to, you know, experiencing seeing a teacher, you know, almost every day.

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah. So my personal experience, I didn't have any social workers involved in my life, but I did go through events in my life that, I guess, in a way impacted me and were quite traumatic. And I've always…I guess, like you say, you don't see social workers at school, you don't see it on the news, only the bad things. And I just always wanted to help children. From the age of eleven it was just always in me that I just wanted to do something to be able to help children who maybe needed support, but also parents needing support as well. And when I was in school I was told that I would never be a social worker because I'm dyslexic. And that proved…you know, now I am a social worker, I have the degree. And I also was more determined to be a social worker and be a good social worker as well.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And how has you having dyslexia helped the people that you work with, whether it's children or young people or even parents who might also have learning difficulties? [0:14:14.1]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah, so a lot of the time it's about advocating for them. I've had a similar family at work that I've dealt with and the professionals have said, 'Yes, but she cannot do this,' and I've said, 'Yes, but if you write it down on paper, that may help.' So whereas people with dyslexia, they may have a certain pathway, whereas I can then bring ideas to the table where it's outside of the box, a different way of thinking. And then I've also been able to, with my adolescents and younger mums, younger dads, sort of give them an easy read. So anyone with learning disabilities, if you give them a big report to read, it's going to be such a struggle for them. So if we give them an easier read with just the concerns, the worries and what's going well, it's easier and it helps them more to understand and work with me.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah, definitely. And I think your generation especially, they are more aware of, and there's just more awareness around learning difficulties or neurodivergence and different types of difficulties, learning difficulties that one may have, whereas older people, often they're diagnosed in their adult life and nowadays there's much more awareness, much more resources available to detect learning disabilities. So that obviously plays a part as well for people of your generation. I sound really old! I am very old but your generation is different to my generation, so…

Omar, you consider yourself an activist in the social work world. What does that mean and how has the fact that you are Gen Z reflected in that? [0:15:49.7]

Omar Mohamed: Yeah. It's an interesting one. I think the word 'activist' can be quite loaded for some people, and I've definitely experienced in the social work sphere that a lot of the older generation of social workers will see activism as this really radical thing that's only for younger people and you need quite a lot of energy to do that, and that sort of thing. You know, I talk quite a lot about activism, and am trying to activate more people into activism, and really it's just about taking an act, in terms of changing something and speaking up on matters that you're passionate about. And I think we're all activists within social work. We have to be. You know, we're all passionate about why we went into social work. So I think activism lives inside of the values of the profession. And yeah, I really enjoy kind of framing myself as an activist, and I think we all should as social workers.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And what about the work you've done with the curriculum and decolonising it? [0:16:48.3]

Omar Mohamed: Yeah. So my work with other student colleagues during my university experience, we felt that the curriculum was very, very…it felt stuck in a period of time, and I think we noticed that when we were speaking to past students who had the exact same slides as what we were having ten years' later. And actually, what we wanted to do was kind of think about what the curriculum needs to reflect in social work education and practice in the society that we live in today.

And in terms of decolonising, what that really meant for myself and other students is we wanted to ensure that the curriculum is truly representative to enable the future generation of social workers to work within issues such as racism and anti-racism, you know, understanding that social work is an international profession. There's so much kind of, like, super-diversity within the United Kingdom that we will work with, and potentially working internationally as well. So it's really important to try and kind of, you know, stop the curriculum that is, you know, whitewashed or Euro-centric or just very much, you know, western-focused, but also to try and bring in kind of perspectives from, you know, countries that we previously have colonised, and the global south and the global context.

And we really felt that once that work started and we were able to have a bit more of that on the curriculum it really did…I know it really helped me when I went into my ASYE to be able to kind of integrate that diverse kind of knowledge bases.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Let's go back to the original question. Can you tell me some of the things that you've found working with young people? What are the biggest problems that are affecting young people that you work with at the moment, from a young person's perspective yourself? [0:18:47.7]

Elizabeth Glandfield: From myself, I would say with adolescents, mental health. I think that's a really, really big thing at the moment. And social media. The way you look and the way you should look. Relationships. Having a

boyfriend, not having a boyfriend, not having a girlfriend, having a girlfriend. Sexuality. But with young parents that I work with, I think that is the housing crisis and the lack of money leading to food banks and not being able to afford maybe baby items. That's a really big challenge for young people at the moment.

Omar Mohamed: I think for me I've definitely seen what Elizabeth's talking about in terms of mental health. I've started to notice that for a lot of the young people that I work with, so thinking about maybe the age ranges of, like, thirteen to seventeen, there's a lot around kind of harm outside the home. So kind of being involved in kind of antisocial behaviour, sometimes criminal activity. And I think it's really interesting 'cause it's so important in that kind of light stage, you know, kind of thirteen to seventeen, to kind of find your identity. You know, I know that recently, you know, coming out of being a teenager and even, you know, still now as a 22-year old, there's a lot around identity and feeling like you want to belong somewhere and to an identity, to a label, to a community. And I think that happens a lot for young people. And then unfortunately, you know, there are situations where harm outside the home can happen because there is that…there are experiences where people can, you know, see that as a vulnerable thing for young people and they take advantage of that. So that can be quite kind of upsetting to work with in practice. Yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I mean, I spoke to a social worker who works in a school and she said, like you said Elizabeth, mental health is a massive thing but specifically within that self-harm is really on the rise. And I wonder, is it easier to understand self-harm being a bit younger yourselves, or is it because it is quite difficult for people to understand why people self-harm and how to treat them and, you know, work with them. It's a really hard topic, there's not a lot of understanding around it generally. Have you had much experience with that? [0:21:12.0]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah. I mean, I have. I mean, as a younger person, in my teenage years a lot of people were self-harming. It was quite visible. And I'd had people who would self-harm and then the other person would self-harm because they have. And it was, you know, really upsetting to see. But there was just no one there to support those people. So not…so for me, I know mental health services work so hard, but I can't see much of a change in terms of self-harm and suicide prevention, which is why I did a course on it to also up my understanding around it, really, so then I can help parents and the teenagers. A lot of parents don't know how to, you know, clean the self-harm after their teenager has self-harmed themselves. But also, it's not just direct self-harm with razors. It's drinking, it's drug use, it's banging your head against a wall. They're all forms of self-harm. Which I think a lot of people forget. And also not just older people. I mean, I have had some older people say, 'Well, self-harm is just you get a sharp knife or a razor,' but it's not. It's so much more than that, and I don't think there's that much education around it.

Omar Mohamed: Yeah. I had a similar kind of experience working with a family where kind of the teenager of the family was self-harming. I think the parents were not kind of very understanding about it and I think they were really trying to dismiss it. And I think, you know, the beauty of social work is you can really advocate for children in situations like that to try

and, well, empower the children to have their voice heard, but if not, in situations advocate and try and speak for them, and try to kind of ascertain their wishes and feelings from what you know, and what the evidence and the theories tell us. And actually, there's so much information about self-harm out there. However, some families, you know, won't be able to make use of that. I mean, as Elizabeth said, it is an issue that a child and family need to work on together, because there is a lot that the family can do, or even the network around that child can do, to try and support a child. So yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I have one more question. What have you learnt from young people that you did not know yourself as a young person, whether it's new lingo, some trend or something? I mean, I know we're all continuously learning, and as social workers you are always learning. But despite being young, obviously there's things that are for even younger people and have passed you by. So can you think of anything? [0:23:57.0]

Elizabeth Glandfield: I have one example in my head. I had an adolescent say to me, 'The gavvers are coming.' And I said, 'Who are the gavvers?' She said, 'They're the police.'

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Oh.

Elizabeth Glandfield: So I didn't know that some adolescents or teenagers call the police 'gavvers'. So it's a different language. And more slang and language is coming out all the time in young people. So I think for me, I sort of learnt that although I am young, I am actually older in a sense because there's still new language coming out and new slang that I don't know about, and it's making me feel older. So I think around that, yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: That's funny.

Omar Mohamed: I have quite a lot of young people that watch a certain YouTuber, and the YouTuber kind of makes videos around, like, social issues and things like that, and it's quite dramatic. But I think it's really interesting that young people are quite well-versed in some of those social issues and they're kind of, you know, looking at that. I mean, it's quite common. You know, this YouTuber has millions and millions of subscribers, and there's definitely a few young people that I've worked with that watch his videos. And it was just something that was completely new and introduced to me. I mean, I think it speaks to the, you know, existence that young people are interested in kind of social issues in the world and wanting to try and make a difference.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah. I find one thing that parents – and I don't mean parents who are under the radar of social services, I just mean parents generally – they can be very unaware of what's out there, in terms of YouTube, social media, and many of them don't know half of, you know, what apps are out there, and it's really about staying on top of it. And I can imagine as a social worker when you're going into see a family, the parents – like all parents – don't always know what's out there and it must be really difficult to work with them in that way when you have to tell them stuff, like, 'No, this is what your child is doing.' It's hard.

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah. I've had it before where they've been on Snapchat but parents didn't realise the age of the Snapchat but also didn't realise that there was a Snapchat Maps, and I had to explain, 'No, there is, and your children have their maps on so other people can see where they are, they can know where your home is.' And it was on for everyone and the parent had no idea. And that was really hard.

Omar Mohamed: Yeah. Yeah, I think similarly, I think e-safety is such a big issue. I have some children and families I work with where that's the only issue, and why they're open to a child-in-need plan, for example. And it is about that. There's a lot of harm on the internet. And it's about how do we safeguard children from that. I think having, you know, very recent experiences with the internet, I can think of lots and lots of different types of harm that, you know, parents that didn't grow up that may find that, you know, it's just completely alien. So then that expectation for a family to put those safeguards in place is quite unrealistic. And I think there is a lot of support that needs to be out there for families around e-safety.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah. I mean, I was with a social worker. We were shadowing social workers and she did a graded profile, care graded profile. And it was around safety and one of those things was online safety. And the questions were really hard. And I was sitting there thinking, 'Mm, gosh, I wonder how many parents would score a 1 or a 2 on this?' I think most would be like 3, 4, 5. 'Cause it goes up to 5, right? So they're quite…they can be quite stringent and quite difficult, I think, 'cause a lot of parents do not have those safeguards across the country. Which is a shame. Maybe more education's needed. I don't know if that's something that should really come from the social work sector, but certainly from schools maybe.

Elizabeth Glandfield: Yeah, I completely agree with that. More from schools. We've had before, and we've put it on a plan, and we said to schools to do e-safety but they haven't got any e-safety. But I guess the positive of us being younger is that we're able to go out there and we know the different things on social media, we know the different apps, but we can also go back to our team and to our older colleagues and write out for them, write a list out for them, 'These are the apps at the moment, this is the harm.' So we're able to educate. But should it always be social work and younger social workers' responsibility? I don't know.

Omar Mohamed: Yeah. I was just having a discussion with my manager today actually about this. And I put myself to do some of the e-safety work with one of the children that I'm working with because the school had refused. And it does make me think, if I didn't have that knowledge, who would have taken that work up? So is it the right place for social work to be doing this or do we need more work on a kind of national scale throughout schools? So yeah, to implement more knowledge around e-safety. And not just for the child but for the family, you know, for the parent, the grandparents, for the uncles and the aunties. Everyone involved needs to be able to help safeguard children from harms on the internet.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I'm really glad you said that because that is something quite invaluable you can bring to the table at work. But is it your job, as you

said? Probably not. I mean, how much can you do? But it's certainly an asset, I would think, to have young social workers like yourselves on the team.

Thank you. I think that's all for now. Thanks for coming on. It's been really lovely speaking to you both. [0:29:47.7]

Elizabeth Glandfield: Thank you.

Omar Mohamed: Thank you very much.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I hope you enjoyed listening to that. To learn more about Community Care and the work we do, please visit www.communitycare.co.uk. Follow us on Instagram, @thesocialwork community. Yes, we've had a name change. And don't forget to follow wherever you get your podcasts from. That way you'll be updated when we drop a new episode. And if there is something you want us to cover here on the Social Work Community podcast, or if you just want to say hi, you can get in touch with Kirsty or myself on www.thesocialworkcommunity.com. If you haven't already, do listen to the very first episode of this podcast, which is about the impact of negative media coverage of social work.

We have two other podcasts that you should definitely add to your library. The first is the Employer Zone Insights podcast, which showcases important issues within social work in collaboration with different organisations. And there's Community Care Inform Learn on the Go, where experts and academics in the social care sector discuss research, theories and practice issues. So go and give them a follow.

That's all for now. See you next time.