Western Faculty Profile: **Dr. Marie Savundranayagam**

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No conflicts of interest declared

Tell me a little bit about yourself and your career path.

I started to develop an interest in aging after my second year in undergrad in the Arts & Science Program at McMaster University. This program was very self-directed and used problem-based learning. During the summer after my second year, I got a job for a program called: Partners for a Better Future for Toronto. This program would pair a university student with an organization that works with children, adults, or older adults. My job as student was to complete a project for the organization. I worked for the Second Mile Club of Toronto; they provide all kinds of services for older adults. At that time, they ran two day programs, provided home care services, and care management for frail older adults. I was asked to complete a community needs assessment for them. I had never done one before, so I learned as I went, and this job opportunity was when I truly started to get interested in gerontology. Over the summer, I looked at two neighborhoods: a Chinese and Portuguese neighborhood in downtown Toronto. I would walk around these neighborhoods to get to know what was available for older adults. I had the opportunity to walk with a social worker while he was completing his visits with older adults. It was very insightful to see what kinds of services they needed. After that summer job, I took every opportunity while at McMaster University to write essays about aging and mental health. In our fourth year we had the opportunity to complete a thesis. I met with the director of our program to get recommendations of professors whose research interests aligned with my interest in mental health and aging. That is when I met my mentor, Dr. Ellen Ryan, whose research was on communication and aging. We worked together in the summer of my third year. In my fourth year, I did my thesis on person-centered communication with persons living with dementia. It was Dr. Ryan who encouraged me to pursue a PhD in Gerontology at the University of Kansas when I was working on my undergraduate thesis. I think it is important to always be ready for opportunities that may arise from working with a professor. My Master's degree examined the role of communication problems that accompany dementia on caregiver burden. At the time nobody had really studied it in a quantitative way. There were many excellent qualitative research findings that suggested that family caregivers were distressed by dementia-related communication impairments. However, our study was the first one to show

quantitatively that there was this link between communication problems and caregiver burden. My PhD focused more on spouses and how that relationship changes due to caregiving.

What is your current main research focus?

Currently, my research remains on caregiving, both from the perspectives of family caregivers and formal caregivers. I believe keeping one's research focused and not scattered on various topics is important. My research lab currently has about 9 ongoing projects in this field. We implemented an intervention called Be Epic for front-line formal caregivers of persons living with dementia. We are assessing the impact of that intervention, checking to see if the caregivers increased their person-centered communication over time. We are also looking at the overlap between language strategies that are effective for communicating and looking at exactly what 'person-centered' means. This term can be broad, and we are trying to make it very specific so it easier to train staff or family caregivers. We also have a project on homecare policy. Policy is very important in enabling the types of research that we conduct and in understanding how to create interventions that will benefit workers and are really looking at the social structures that enable and enhance the care that they give.

What are some challenges you faced while conducting your research?

The biggest challenge is usually recruiting both formal and informal caregivers to participate in research as many are busy providing intensive care to their clients. It is becoming increasingly hard to find personal support workers (PSW) as they are the front-line staff and there is a shortage of PSWs in Ontario and across Canada.

What is the long-term goal of your research?

The long-term goal is to improve the relationships between persons with dementia and those who care for them. From a family perspective, when somebody has dementia the fear is that they are losing that person and the disease will take over. Through this research, I think we are bringing the person to the forefront. Putting the person first allows us to keep that relationship with the

person strong and we can still relate as partners and family members as opposed to focusing solely on the disease and all the complications related to it.

Through your research have there been any findings that you have found to be the most effective in improving this person-centered care?

Our research lab is trying to show that one of the most effective ways to improve the care is through person-centered communication. Using this form of communication aims to stop the use of restraints and heavy-duty medications. Instead when there are responsive behaviours like aggression, the caregiver (formal or informal) can think more about the reason why the person is acting this way, as it could be that they are in pain, or they could be experiencing delirium due to a mix-up in medications. It is really to help the caregivers be better problem solvers and soothe and really care through communication.

Is there a reason you chose to come and work at Western?

Yes, I think the health studies program is a really unique department because it is interdisciplinary. I think some of the most complex questions out there are best answered through an interdisciplinary focus. That is one of the main reasons why I like this particular department. I also have some wonderful colleagues that I have worked with since the 90s and we have some wonderful community partners. I think the best part is that we are able to work closely with the community because of our strong university community partnerships that enable us to have an impact on real people.

What qualities do you look for in a potential research assistant?

Curiosity, and specifically a genuine curiosity in aging is the first thing I consider. Other important aspects of a successful research assistant include a strong work ethic, professionalism, meeting deadlines, and accountability.

To learn more about Dr. Savundranayagam's lab and research, please visit their website:

https://www.uwo.ca/fhs/shs/about/faculty/savundranayagam_m.html