

MARY TACHIKO OI
Interviewed by David Kuroda
at Miss Oi's office
2730 Wilshire Blvd.
Santa Monica, CA
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ABSTRACT:

Mary T. Oi., a graduate of the School of Social Work, USC, 1957, has been a social work practitioner for approximately 50 years, working in public and private agencies, a private therapeutic day school for children with emotional problems, as well as being in private practice. She was among the Japanese and Japanese Americans confined to concentration camps during World War II. She was interviewed by David Kuroda, MSW, from USC, a former mediator in the California Family Court system, now a mediator in private practice.

KURODA: These oral history interviews are going to be stored in the Social Welfare Archives of the University of Southern California, where there is a website for the California Social Welfare Archives. People who want to find out about what it was like for a social worker in the concentration camps where Japanese were confined in the United States during World War II, will be able to go to the website and gain access to the interviews. Whatever you talk about will be available to researchers and people who are curious about what was going on in the country at that time. After transcription, those documents will be available to researchers and students who want to know more about social welfare policy and what was going on at that time.

Let me introduce the interview for today. This is Mary Oi. We're in her office in Santa Monica, California. Mary has been a social worker for many years. First let me

ask you, Mary, how did you get into the field of social welfare? Tell us about that and how your interest in social work developed.

OI: I've been thinking about this. I had no idea what social work was, actually. When I entered college, I was not sure what I wanted to do. At that time in Los Angeles history, no Japanese American could become a teacher in the Los Angeles public schools, so becoming an Education major was out of the question for me. I wanted to know what happened to a person – an individual person – and see how they developed, whereas in teaching, that happens, certainly, but it's a group situation. I felt that I wasn't very good with these groups, so.... Anyway, I decided I didn't want to teach. I was just a liberal arts major, and I majored in sociology at the time I entered college, having just turned 17. That was before the War.

KURODA: When you talk about the War, that's World War II?

OI: Yes.

KURODA: We don't hear that too often, you know. People talk about "before the War." I used to hear that a lot with my parents.

OI: Because that was a marking point. Well, I was in college for a year-and-a-half before the War. I really didn't get into much of anything and was just taking those required courses. But prior to that, in high school, I had a course called Senior Problems. It was a new course, and we just talked about the problems people had. This was an area of some interest to me and it stuck with me. This goes even further back when I was in 10th grade. Do you remember when Roosevelt established those work programs for people out of work? What did they call that?

KURODA: Federal Unemployment Relief and then the WPA.

OI: The WPA. The artists were given work: they did a lot of things like that. There was something for children, for youth. I think it was called NYA: National Youth Administration. I got a job with them one year, and I would go after school to an outpatient clinic.

KURODA: This was as a 10th grader?

OI: 10th or 11th, something like that.

KURODA: You were pretty young at the time.

OI: Yes. I was a receptionist, interviewing people who came, taking data, and then referring them to the doctors who were there. Mostly, they were given physicals so they could do work like I was doing, all over the city. That was interesting. So I got into interviewing. Then in the camps, I started by being “a clothing allowance person” who interviewed everyone in the camps.

KURODA: These camps were the relocation centers and concentration camps for the Japanese?

OI: Yes, it was the Amache Relocation Center in Colorado, not the Assembly Center, which was Santa Anita. In Santa Anita, I worked as a pre-school teaching assistant. I hated it. It was too noisy, there was no control, and I felt I was doing very little. I would take the kids around the racetrack for a walk. That was about it. The most interesting part of that to me was we had parent-teacher conferences of sorts. The parents would come, and they would defer to me as the teacher.

KURODA: There was a lot of respect for teachers.

OI: They would bow down to me, and I just felt so guilty about that, because I wasn't doing anything.

KURODA: This was the Assembly Center before the Japanese were shipped off to camps?

OI: To the inner camps, away from the West Coast.

KURODA: So this was at the Santa Anita Racetrack?

OI: Yes.

KURODA: You were talking about how you began to do some work at the Amache Center in Colorado. Was there a lot of social work in camps?

OI: Yes. I started with the clothing allowance, registering everyone: how many in the family, and so forth. From that, the Director asked me if I would be what they called a "Social Case Aid." So, that's what I did.

KURODA: What did you do as a social case aid?

OI: I was a social worker, working under supervision.

KURODA: What kinds of problems did you help people with? This was what year: 1940 what?

OI: It was 1942 to about 1944, something like that.

KURODA: This was right about the time World War II was going on, right after Pearl Harbor?

OI: It was right during the War. I think, in our camp, we had a very good social welfare department. They tried to make it run very professionally. We had an MSW-trained director who got an MSW teacher of social work from Denver University, to move a town 17 miles away so she could be our case supervisor. She had seminars and things like that every week. I was included in all this, so I learned a lot.

As I recall, the Social Welfare building consisted of a barracks building with a private toilet with a door, affording about the only privacy one could get in camp. The Department consisted of about five Caucasian, six or seven Japanese Americans, two with M.A. degrees in social work, I believe from U.C. Berkeley or Mill College. In addition, there were about three or four without degrees, who were Case Aides. The Caucasian staff was paid U.S. wages. The Japanese Americans were paid the professional salary of \$19.00 per month—the highest wage in the camp. I felt all but two of the Caucasian staff were compassionate, so work time was spent in learning and working, without the added stress of being in an environment of co-workers with racist and/or condescending attitudes.

KURODA: Mary, how did you get involved in the social work, the social work case program at camp?

OI: Because I worked giving clothing allowances, registering people. That was done in the social welfare department. From that, I got to know the people there.

KURODA: This is very fascinating, because even in the literature by Kitano on Japanese-Americans, there was very little mention of the social work programs in the camps. What kinds of problems did you, as a social worker, help people with?

OI: I believe most referrals came from the Block Managers who knew the people in his block. Residents would go to them if they were having problems. I should stress the point that I was very young then, still a minor, and was a Case Aide. Thus, my knowledge of what went on was only through my observations. Also, the idea of Confidentiality was stressed because of the close quarters and privacy concerns. The types of problems were often about split families—parts of the family were in one camp

and some in another. Efforts were made to reunite them. Other problems were people who were depressed, sick—the usual kinds of problems. Also, some foster care of children.

KURODA: For children whose parents weren't there?

OI: They were not there for various reasons like illness, and they may have been left behind in California, because they were in a sanitarium or something like that. The children – I think there was a place – one camp that had them, like Manzanar, but I'm not sure. Then, relatives would do that. We had one case that I worked on, where this older woman had this young baby, and I can't recall how she came to have the baby, but she said she couldn't take care of this child anymore. She asked that we do something. We knew the child, so we did. At that time we had just hired a "Caucasian medical social worker with an MSW from Western Reserve. She came to the camp, and she was supposed to be a medical social worker. She went with me to remove this child. Prior to that, I had talked to this lady as best I could, and she said she was ready to give this child up. We went to pick up this child, and the woman was – she couldn't give the child up. She started.....

KURODA: She probably changed her mind.

OI: Well, she was having a real hard time about that, and she was crying. She was handing the child over to me, and then she would hit me – not hard, but.... The social worker from Western Reserve hit her back. I explained to her, the social worker, that this woman is going through a lot of trauma right now, and this was her way of trying to show her pain, guilt, ambivalence. I had to explain it to her.

KURODA: Did this woman speak English, or did she speak Japanese?

OI: She was not Japanese – oh, the client?

KURODA: The client, the older woman.

OI: She was Japanese, older Japanese.

KURODA: Did she speak English or did she speak Japanese?

OI: She spoke Japanese.

KURODA: And you spoke and understood Japanese?

OI: Simple Japanese. Anyway, these are universal issues of separation and they transcend all races. The social worker was amazing to me – that she didn't understand this, and here I was, trying to explain. But, we did get the child out of there. We had to wait for the more permanent foster care, so our director took that child to his own home, which, I think, at that time, was located outside the camp.

KURODA: So the social work director took the child home into his own residence?

OI: Yes, until plans could be made more permanently. We were waiting for transportation and things like that. Another interesting case I had was an older woman who had come from a central California farm and she had a lot of kids: some were married, she had grandchildren. This woman was old; she really looked old, like toothless old. She then said that she was pregnant.

KURODA: How old do you think she might have been?

OI: Well, her daughter was probably forty-something. She was old, and her husband was old.

KURODA: Fifty, sixty?

OI: They were transient farm workers.

KURODA: And she was pregnant?

OI: I think she looked like she was sixty, maybe. Anyway, she went to the doctor. I had told her she needed to go to the doctor, and she did get pre-natal care. I spoke with the doctor. The doctor said she was pregnant. That woman, in the middle of a big snowstorm, delivered that baby. She walked from her barracks to the hospital and said, "I'm delivering." She got there, and there was no baby.

KURODA: There was no baby?

OI: No.

KURODA: What happened?

OI: It was what they call a pseudo cyesis. I learned about this: it's a false pregnancy. It's a psychological kind of problem, and I felt later on that her big role in life was to have babies, and she just didn't have a small child anymore. It was sort of sad, and after that I went to see her and she acted like nothing happened.

KURODA: And had you become her counselor after that?

OI: No, not especially, I would feel unsure, but I didn't do anything actually. But you know her whole family was so involved too, it was amazing. The woman did not need to talk about it.

KURODA: Mary, how do you suppose your past experiences affected your career later on?

OI: Well, I got into social work.

KURODA: So it was because of that experience of helping people that you decided to get a graduate education?

OI: Well, I went on and finished college after the War ended.

KURODA: Yes.

OI: But when I left the camp, it was still during the war in the 1940s. I went to Washington, DC, and I left camp having secured a job as a typist clerk of the OPA, which was the Office of Price Administration.

KURODA: Yes.

OI: That was all I was qualified to do. So I went there and I looked at the place. It covered a whole block with nothing but typists sitting in rows (laughter). I thought to myself, "Gee, I really, really don't want to do this." (laughter) But you know, you had no choice. Before I started the job, I got a telegram saying they would not hire me.

KURODA: Why wouldn't they hire you?

OI: Because they said I was still considered suspect.

KURODA: Because you were Japanese?

OI: Well, I left the camp and they gave me government security clearance. But they said that my father was interned separately from us and therefore, I was also suspect. So I asked for a hearing and eventually they cleared me they said. But they...

KURODA: Well, it's very good that you asked for a hearing because many of the Japanese, at the time, had just walked away and not questioned that decision. So you asked for a hearing?

OI: Oh, yes and I got a hearing (laughter). It was quite an experience and at the end, I got so angry that I said, "Even if you cleared me, I wouldn't work for you for anything." (laughter) They started asking me about religion; it was ridiculous. I said, "This is against the Constitution. You should never ask me what my religion is," and things like that. "Why didn't I become this religion rather than that religion?" Things like that.

KURODA: They were asking some pretty personal...

OI: Yes.

KURODA:family questions that were not directly related to the work that you were being hired to do.

OI: My brother had just graduated from college, and a week after graduation, he went into the army, the U.S. Army. They said, “Why didn’t he go in earlier?” I said, “He was going to be drafted and he wanted to wait until his graduation.” That was only a few weeks or so. They were saying, “Well, he should’ve just volunteered.” Remember when they didn’t want Japanese American men in the army?

KURODA: That’s right.

OI: Now they were saying, “Why didn’t he,” anyway. They were saying things like that which by the end of this hearing made me so angry (laughter). I was without a job, and whether I went to the employment service and I did work for a Catholic organization, Catholic USO. It was a clerical job. I didn’t stay with that very long; I didn’t like it. Then I went back to the employment service and got another job and this time, it was with a social welfare agency, Foster daycare and counseling Ass’n.” It was a fairly new program, and it was for daycare for children of working mothers. In Washington, in wartime, a lot of the mothers worked, so they needed daycare. I think it was a fairly new kind of thing. The agency developed foster daycare homes, supervised them, did all the work with the mother and the foster mothers. So I went to work there.

I was hired as a Receptionist-Clerk-Switchboard operator. (I learned this on the job). From the beginning, I was included on all staff meetings, case conferences. Soon, I was taking case dictation, and with some invented shorthand, learned to keep statistical records. I believe this experience in this agency—the people employed, their

professionalism and kindness, probably gave me the push to become a real social worker. I also saw how an agency operated. The Board meetings were held there. I recall the wife of the Washington Post publisher, professors from Catholic and Howard Universities Schools of Social Work, among others. All social workers had MSW degrees, several who fled Europe, African Americans, American Caucasians, students who were placed there for field work. In other words, I had a new kind of world open up to me. This kind of integrated staff in segregated Washington of that time was unusual.

KURODA: When did you start graduate school?

OI: When I returned to California. When the war ended, I came back and went back to UCLA and finished my undergrad in Sociology. As an undergrad, I worked for a Sociology professor and we did evacuation claims research, we published a book on it.

KURODA: Mary, how did your experiences with the prejudice and camp experience affect how you, then, later on in your social work career and handling things with other programs?

OI: How did I handle?

KURODA: I guess the question is, how your experiences with prejudice with those who did not hire you for a job because you were Japanese American...

OI: Yes.

KURODA: ...the past experience of all of those people must have had an effect on your later career as a professional social worker. Expose the fact of how those events were?

OI: Well, I think that people in social work, generally - I don't know. There were people who I thought had the right kind of values. So the agencies I worked in, like the one in Washington, was very therapeutic for me. It counteracted the other things. But in

the other agencies I worked in, I've always had that experience of having much more acceptance. Now the prejudice part of it, I don't know how that - I'm much more aware of it, of people being prejudiced. (laughter) I'm more sensitive to that in clients.

KURODA: Yes. Now as an administrator, because you have worked in a number of different agencies, did that sensitivity to prejudice, even for other people, contribute to how you handled issues and how you handled staff problems?

OI: Well, yes but I don't think I was quite aware of it. So when I've been in a position of hiring people, I wouldn't hire anyone who I thought was prejudiced that much (laughter), if you know what I mean. So the kinds of people I worked with were not prejudiced people on the whole. I remember this now. At one time, we were having students, psychology students, from a psychology school connected with a religious seminary. When one of those interns finished the interview (she was a nice person, probably quite good), she would end the interview by putting her hand over the client's head and praying. I felt this was totally inappropriate because we were not a religious agency. So I talked to her about it, and she said she didn't think it was harmful. I asked her to stop it because I said I thought the client would not be in favor of it if they were not of her religion. But things like that.

KURODA: Yes. Mary, of all the things you've done in your professional career, what are some of the things that you are most proud of?

OI: Proud of? Well, I don't know. I think I'm the most proud of having helped a lot of people, hopefully (laughter). They could go on and lead more productive lives. Whether that's done through an agency or privately...

KURODA: Yes.

OI: That's very rewarding.

KURODA: So you really like the individual clinical work that you had or some of the people you worked with?

OI: Yes.

KURODA: How about policy issues or organizational issues, because you've worked with a number of different agencies including the Marianne Frostig School.

OI: I worked for the County Welfare for quite a while.

KURODA: Were there other programs or policies that you helped institute that you took some pride in?

OI: When I worked at the Marianne Frostig School (now, Center), I was their first full time social worker. My job was to set up the clinical department, so I did that. That was okay, but it wasn't something that I was crazy about doing (laughter). It was sort of put upon me to do this.

KURODA: But you did it?

OI: I did it.

KURODA: You were the first social worker there at the Frostig School and today, there's probably more service there, right?

OI: Yes. There's a whole diagnostic service and a whole clinical program. We instituted therapy for the children, parent counseling, family work, things like those.

KURODA: Were those some of the things you initiated?

OI: Yes. We had consultants, we had interns from, as I said, some of these religious places, but these were psychology interns. Prior to that, the other thing at the Frostig School was a lot about children with organic disabilities and trying to tease out what was

emotional and what was more organic. More importantly, how do we find the strengths in each child and how can these be utilized to help the child to learn? How do we mediate some of that? Dr. Frostig was very good at that. I learned a lot from that. Prior to that, I worked at Pasadena Child Guidance Clinic.

KURODA: The Child Guidance Clinic - what did you do there?

OI: That was my first job after my MSW, I had been placed there as a second-year student. Then when I finished as a student, they hired me. I worked there for seven years.

KURODA: Worked on?

OI: I was a psychiatric social worker, working mostly with parents. Then, I had started work supervising social work students from USC.

KURODA: So you were a supervisor there at the Child Guidance Clinic in Pasadena for how many years?

OI: I was a student supervisor. We only had a few social workers. It was a very small clinic: the director was a social worker and I think there were two other social workers. Then they hired me, - it was a small place. Now it's changed its name and it's incorporated under the new name.

KURODA: What's the name now?

OI: The Child Guidance Clinic of Pasadena. It is now a part of Pacific Clinics, and continues to be a core program of the Pacific Clinics.

KURODA: So you had a number of students that you helped train?

OI: No, not a number. I had two students. They only had two, always. I had two students finish there. During the time of the last batch, I had to have emergency surgery, so I couldn't supervise them. Then after that, I left.

KURODA: You were in the Frostig School for what? Twenty, twenty five years?

OI: Yes, something like that. And they moved from place to place expanded.

KURODA: Yes.

OI: In different programs there, we had different directors.

KURODA: How would you say the social political climate of the country during your career is different than now? How would you compare the two? You were starting to practice as a social worker right after the World War II ended. There was probably a lot of prejudice against Asians. What was it like for you to be a professional social worker during that time?

OI: Well, you know time goes on. I think people forget about the prejudices of wartime, but I don't think I've ever had an experience where a client would refuse to see me because of my ethnic background. They would ask questions about what I was. I would tell them.

KURODA: But no client walked out after you told them you were Japanese American?

OI: No, I don't think they ever did. I used to do work with children and some of the kids would ask me a lot of questions because of the movies and so forth. When I would tell them I was of Japanese background they would say I didn't look like that because I didn't speak like they do. They would mimic all of the stereotypes you see, like the appearance with their eyes, things like that. No, I don't think I have experienced it that much. I had wondered about it in terms of starting private practice, but I started private practice part

time when I was still with the Pasadena Child Guidance Clinic. I worked with the psychiatrist and then later on, I started private practice. So, it just sort of continued.

KURODA: Were there additional concerns about your private practice because of your ethnic background?

OI: You mean from clients?

KURODA: Yes.

OI: No, because they knew who I was (laughter). Most of the people I've seen have been referrals from other clients so they knew who I was (laughter). Interesting.

KURODA: I sometimes get a startled look when a client sees me for the first time because over the phone you can't tell what my ethnicity is. When people refer to me they don't say, "Oh, this Japanese American. He is a social worker."

OI: Don't they ask about your name?

KURODA: Some people do, but most don't.

OI: Well, my name is so unusual. When I first started, long ago, they would always say "Oh veh." (laughter). Then they would say, "Wow," and I would explain. Then some would say, "Are you French?" because it's like "oui." We would talk about it, laugh about it and so on. I never had trouble with it. The more we talked and joked about it, they could see I spoke their language and understood the jokes, and a beginning kind of connection was being made. Once they were in my office, I usually would tell them about my educational qualifications, so they could hear my language more.

KURODA: One of the things I wanted to ask about is what was the most satisfying part of your professional career? Also, what, for you, have been some of the most difficult parts of your career as a social worker?

OI: What was the most satisfying? Well, I think, as I said before, it was this direct contact with the clients and trying to understand them, which is always to me very, very interesting. People say to me from way back, "Don't you get tired of listening to people's problems?" Well, I have to say I don't. Everyone is so different, and the way they evolve and the way they present themselves to me, it's very interesting. I like working with adolescents because they really are interesting (laughter).

KURODA: Lots of credit to you and your spirit because you're almost eighty years old

OI: Yes, I know.

KURODA: To still really enjoy hearing the stories and to never tire of all the stories that people bring - it's pretty amazing.

OI: Yes. Some of the things that I've done or thought of, they've come about (Laughter). In the old days, they used to say that children with learning disabilities or hyperactivity - that kind of thing -- was emotional. Remember that? Autistic children was poor parenting. They would go through...

KURODA: I remember the thinking about that in those days.

OI: I always thought that was baloney. I would say that to the parents. I said it's not that at all. You can get into poor parenting, but it's not because of poor parenting that you have this child with brain damage. But in some places, that's what they were led to believe. They would be treated with psychotherapy, period, and then they got into behavior modification. That in itself, I don't think is the answer either.

KURODA: So you were one of the first in the field that recognized that organically, there are actually problems in the brain for some of these children that forget what they're

learning. It affected their emotions. How about challenges, problems that you encountered in your career?

OI: Well, I don't think I'm very good at dealing with large administrative edicts that come along. When I worked for the Public Welfare Department, I was doing child welfare, and I really thought that was such a great experience. I think any social worker starting out should do that, should work in the Public Welfare Department, at least for a while, because you really get this background experience that you wouldn't get elsewhere. When I started supervising child welfare, running a unit like that, you would get these statements from Sacramento that said the law has changed, now, to this and this. I couldn't take that. I just felt I didn't want to do this. Then you have to deal with all your workers, deal with their frustrations and all their anger. I just set something up and now they are saying they've got to do otherwise, and over and over, so I quit.

I enrolled at USC School of Social Work in 1956, probably on the last day. I believe between the first and second year, one was allowed seven years to complete the MSW. I recall how I emphasized that I had saved my money and I could pay full tuition. I was accepted. After enrollment, Dean Johnson gave me a partial scholarship from NIMH funds.

This second year at USC was most positive—had great teachers, fieldwork and casework were integrated. The left hand knew what the right hand was doing. There was communication and one felt cared about, especially enjoyed Norris Clas and his history and enjoyed my historical thesis. Reading the New York Times of the turn of the century makes today feel more alive and understandable.

KURODA: Anything, Mary, that you would do differently if you had to do it all over again? Any regrets or any changes you would've made in how you made decisions in your life?

OI: Well, one thing is that if you're in private practice, alone, it's a very lonely place. If social agencies still operated like they used to - I don't know how they really operate - I think that would be a better place to work. You get input from other staff people, you learn more. So, in a sense, I think working in a good social agency probably would have been more interesting from the point of view of co-workers, friendships that sort of thing.

KURODA: You might have enjoyed getting along in a good agency, where you could've combined the clinical experience along with being able to be with colleagues?

OI: Yes, and setting up new programs and things like that.

KURODA: I thought you did that at the Frostig Center?

OI: Yes.

KURODA: Mary, what main changes have you observed in the field of social work from the early days in your career and the trust you manage today?

OI: I think social work as a profession, I hate to say this, I think its gone downhill.

KURODA: Why do you suppose that's happening?

OI: I think the value put upon private practice, of serving middle class and upper class, is too high.

KURODA: Do you think that's hurt the profession - that the value of serving middle, upper classes has hurt the profession?

OI: I think it's hurt the profession in the sense of serving people with less. There's not enough attention paid to helping the poor or the people who aren't able to function. It's kind of understandable and in a way it's not.

KURODA: So that's one of the big differences in social work from your work in the profession in the early years? Things were more committed to giving to the poor?

OI: Yes. In the value put upon that professionally, it was a high value I thought. I think people were pretty committed to that. But I do think that the bureaucratic things and all these changes came through, kind of took away all that importance.

KURODA: There are also huge changes in our country because of welfare reform and the...

OI: Yes, look at welfare reform. It's pretty bad.

KURODA: So we care less about the poor in this country than those that have money?

OI: Yes. It's become so political, and some of the people who are in political positions to establish that kind of policy, I just don't agree with some of that like mental health; mental health - it's pathetic. (laughter)

KURODA: What do you mean?

OI: Well, when I was in social work school and later, we had agencies that dealt with people coming out of state hospitals, following them and helping them get jobs, helping them get settled and so forth. They had ongoing therapy - not therapy - casework help for them.

KURODA: What years are we talking about?

OI: We're talking about 1940's - 1950's. Then everything shut down, state hospitals shut and the homeless population expanded.

KURODA: Why do you suppose that happened?

OI: Because they're mentally ill.

KURODA: No, I mean why were there changes in the mental health system, why were the state hospitals shut down?

OI: Well, they were shut down, I think, because it was during that time, when civil rights, freedom, that kind of thing was a big issue, and I think if you were in a state hospital it was like, well, you're depriving them of their civil rights. That was one aspect. The other one was it's too expensive. They could be taken care of in the community. But they didn't set up good enough programs in the community, at all.

KURODA: Are you referring to some of the changes because of the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act?

OI: Yes, and later. But I think that pretty soon it got so that if you were working with that population, it was so unrewarding. You couldn't follow it; things kept changing constantly. I hope it picks up again.

KURODA: So the reduction in services and the closure of the state hospitals came about probably because of concerns about the...

OI: It was the political - well that was one part.

KURODA: How about politicians' priorities?

OI: But the politicians would use these things in order to do what they wanted to do so, it's really sad. What was your other question? It had to do with?

KURODA: Do you think how the Depression has changed things over the years, and one of the points you made was that earlier social workers, in the '50s and '60s, and the Depression, seemed to care more about the poor?

OI: The other thing too is, the population. Dealing with the poor then, was more rewarding. You could contain it better and think about it in a more contained way. But then, with the greater influx of people coming in from all over the world, it just got so unwieldy that no one knew what to do. That's the way I think. It just got so unsatisfying as a profession. I'm sure a lot of people would disagree with me, but if I were starting out again, I don't know where I would work or what I would want to do.

KURODA: So one of the challenges is that our government and our profession are not telling the very best people who know about human needs and families...

OI: Yes.

KURODA: ...are the very same people that have such a strong distaste for bureaucracy and organization for politic

OI: Yes, I know.

KURODA: So, whereas you could've been acting as a politician or director of a social welfare agency, you chose to spend your time with a private agency and private practice, which for you was much more satisfying.

OI: Yes.

KURODA: I have similar conflicts too, because on one hand, I would like to be at a level where I can influence policy.

OI: Okay, but see, you can do that if you have a source of income that would support your ability to do that. Now, if you went to Sacramento or Washington and became a lobbyist, that's all fine, but where are you going to get supported? I mean there should be an agency for it to do that, because you have to think about making a living.

KURODA: Unless you, of course, are a state senator or if you were at the legislature already, then that gives you a position, and that's been one of the problems. We haven't had a social worker in the White House or in a cabinet position for quite a while.

OI: I know. But there ought to be. You're right, there ought to be something said about that in the schools of social work. There should be a major in that, not how to be a therapists, but how to be someone who works making social policy (Laughter) or affects it. How do you do that now, today?

KURODA: I think there are schools like UCLA, which no longer has a school of social welfare and there is such a welfare program in the School of Public Policy and Research.

OI: Right.

KURODA: So the challenge is to have some of the people who know about policy get into positions where they can actually now change policy.

OI: Well, but then they wouldn't go into social work.

KURODA: That's right, that's right. What future do you see for the social work profession?

OI: If things are now.... well, I feel like it's pretty dismal (Laughter). You know people, younger people, will often ask me, they want to get into becoming therapists and they go to professional schools like CSP (California School of Professional Psychology)...

KURODA: CSPP, yes.

OI: That type of school. What is the fastest way to do the program and so forth? I always tell them go to a social work school.

KURODA: Why do you say that?

OI: Because I think it's better. I think it's easier. It's easier in the sense that you have supervision, you have a supervisor who will supervise you. At the others, you have to go and find your own supervisor and do that kind of thing. Sometimes you can't find one. I get the feeling there's no togetherness or they're out there all by themselves (Laughter). In social work, I feel like there's more of a bonding to a profession. Some think there is a high status in being a psychologist, so they choose to go to the other profession.

KURODA: Although I would say that more and more, as attorneys and judges know, we know what LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) means. I think there's more status in our profession.

OI: Than the others, and the other degrees (Laughter). Yes that's true.

KURODA: Anything else in the last few minutes of our interview that you'd like to say about your life, your career in social work and about what your life has represented?

OI: Well, I must say that I think I'm fortunate, because I've been doing the kind of work that I really do enjoy, and when I hear people at retirement ages say they're so glad to quit working and they're so glad to be out of this, and so forth, as if work was such a drudgery. I feel like I'm so lucky because I've found something that fits me (Laughter). I think it is very important that people do find things that suit their own personality. So that means knowing yourself, and all of that. That's the kind of thing I deal in with my teenagers (Laughter) and that whole identity thing.

KURODA: Mary, do you still look forward to coming to work everyday?

OI: I don't come everyday now, I'm only here one or two days. I'm hoping that will go down. I've got to quit sometime (Laughter). But I haven't taken on new people.

KURODA: Most, so most...

OI: Old people come back. Five years later, they send their kids back (Laughter).

KURODA: So you have clients who five years later are calling?

OI: Oh, twenty years later.

KURODA: Twenty years later?

OI: Yes.

KURODA: Wow!

OI: I ran into a family in a restaurant last week as I was walking out of the restaurant.

They all came running up to me, hugging me. I said, “My God, who are these people?”

Well, they were my clients from...

KURODA: From when?

OI: The girl now is twenty-six. I think I knew her when she was like seven, eight, ten, and in intervals after that.

KURODA: Well, that’s pretty amazing.

OI: The other thing is, in terms of memory, I think my memory is really bad and it’s going. But memory about clients and their families, has always been one of my strong points (Laughter). I don’t know why that is, but I remember what position they were in in the family. I remember what the conflicts were with this one or that one, that kind of thing. It’s weird.

KURODA: Well, it’s pretty amazing that your mind remembers all those things you don’t have to have...

OI: About the client...

KURODA: Yes.

OI: But not about other things, but it is interesting.

KURODA: Well, think of anything that's important for you, Mary.

OI: But you know now your doing mediation. I think social workers probably will go into different fields like that as a professional social worker and still use that title.

KURODA: At the court for many years, most of the staff were professional social workers

OI: Yes.

KURODA: And had that background, including all of our directors, except for the current director.

OI: And now?

KURODA: Now our current director has a marriage family therapy background and comes from...

OI: The people coming in, are they MFCs (Marriage and Family Counselors) too?

KURODA: More and more are MFC or MFTs (Marriage and Family Therapists) as they're called now.

OI: Yes. Why is that?

KURODA: I think as leadership changes, as a director and a manager change, they tend to hire more people from similar backgrounds. Maybe they don't value the...

OI: The training?

KURODA: ...social work training as much. See, that's one of the reasons I think it's important that quality people are in positions of authority and responsibility...

OI: Yes.

KURODA: This happened when you were hiring staff; you would not hire people who didn't share...

OI: Similar values, yes.

KURODA: That's right, that's right. But the dilemma for many people is that the challenges of administration and management are such that they find it unpleasant and distasteful, stressful.

OI: Well, I think what social workers are really better at is treating the person in his own cultural environment, in his own family, his own background, and so forth and to really understand that and to accept to that. I think other professions don't dwell on that as much, and it's too bad.

KURODA: Well, maybe with this batch of more diversity. More diverse clients, and certainly in California, the opportunities for that social work perspective will be greater.

OI: You have to laugh, though, because right now, with the war going on, and they took those prisoners into Cuba, there's a big controversy that their housing and their care is not up to par. Then our Attorney General says, "It's their culture, they're used to that kind of cultural thing." He uses that word. To me it means they don't need good shelter; it's okay because they're used to that, that's been their culture.

KURODA: Oh?

OI: So it's used negatively in life. Then, in the paper, they have this big divorce case of this billionaire whose wife was divorcing him and asking for much child support.

Anyway, I could see someone coming up with this wife trying to keep this child "within her own culture" (Laughter). So they're using this word negatively, they're just throwing it around. So it's going to be a big word. It already is.

KURODA: Mary, I appreciate very much your willingness to be interviewed and to have your comments on tape.

OI: Well, I hope someone will use it someday.

KURODA: I think so. It's been helpful for me to know what your life experiences were and to know what situations my parents were in because they were in the same camp as you.

OI: Yes.

KURODA: To hear about how your clothing allocations developed into a person who became a professional social worker. You've been in the field now for 40 years or longer?

OI: Longer, about 50 years.

KURODA: So you've had a career of over 50 years in social work?

OI: I think so.

KURODA: You have a low number for your social work license?

OI: Yes.

KURODA: You got licensed in 19...?

OI: I was, what is it called - "grandfathered" in.

KURODA: Oh really.

OI: I think so, yes.

KURODA: So after the LCSW came into effect in California, you were grandfathered or grandmothered in?

OI: Isn't that the word they use?

KURODA: They used to use it. I'm not sure it was grandparents or grandmothered...

OI: (Laughter)

KURODA: Or something, but yes. So when did you first get your license as a clinical social worker?

OI: Gosh, I don't remember, after graduate school. Is that a couple of years? Yes, I think so.

Your beginning question, "How did you get in the field of Social Welfare and how did your interest in social work develop," led me into the practicalities.

Underlying this is the psychological impact of family and personal dynamics and the way that shapes the direction of one's life, consciously or unconsciously.

There were three main factors that probably had some major impact on forming my professional self.

1) Being the child of new immigrants, I became the translator and interpreter, to my mother in particular, as many immigrant children must do. This poses both positive and negative aspects in the relationship.

2) My father, in addition to his business, was a natural kind of community organizer and helper. The value of helping others was important.

3) I have a brother six years younger, who became gradually blind from early grade school. By high school graduation, he had lost most of his vision and soon became totally blind. His development was critical to the well-being of the family. My interest in learning-disabled children probably did not come about from nowhere. My brother was able to find his strengths and has used them well.

KURODA: Well, thank you, Mary, very much again on behalf of USC...

OI: Well, you're welcome.

KURODA: For the School of Social Work and the California Social Welfare Archives.

We are interviewing a number of prominent people in the city and making records of conversations. We're sure grateful to add yours to this.

OI: Well, you're welcome. It was interesting doing it (Laughter).