This article explores social work with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, beginning with the
history of colonization and the role this profession played, as well as outlining promising
approaches to helping based on Indigenous worldviews and the challenges of putting
these into practice.

Keywords: Social work, Indigenous Peoples, post-colonial, identity, Canada

Introduction

The profession of social work has played an oppressive role in its involvement with the
Indigenous Peoples in Canada. This began in the 19th century, through the residential
school system, and continued, in the 20th century, with the child welfare system. To this
day, Indigenous Peoples are often the clients of social services agencies in many areas.
Unfortunately, mainstream services often continue to oppress Indigenous Peoples due to
their Euro-centric values and practices, which they assume to be universal. As Indigenous
Peoples gain a measure of self-governance, communities are beginning to take control of
local social services and orient them to their own worldviews and values.

This article will explain who Indigenous Peoples are, including how Canadian settler
governments have imposed racialized identities upon them and will present an overview
of colonization and its current impacts, taking into account the historical and present day
role of social work with families and communities. The article then turns to social work,
or helping, from the perspective of an Indigenous person, including the challenges of
implementing such practices and the roles of non-Indigenous service providers as allies.
Who Are Indigenous Peoples?

Indigenous Peoples are the original inhabitants of what the Haudenosaunee Nations call “Turtle Island,” or what is referred to as North America. Prior to colonization, Indigenous Nations had many rich cultures, languages, political systems, and spiritual practices. Thus, there was much diversity amongst the Nations and geographic territories, although they shared values and a foundational worldview (Baskin, 2011). People belonged to clans that had differing roles so that everyone contributed to their community. The people had strong connections to the land and everything on it. They lived the values of (w)holism, interconnectedness, kinship, and egalitarianism. Children were seen as gifts from the Creator; Elders were highly regarded, women held positions in all areas of life, including governance, and most Nations were matrilineal (Baskin, 2011). Since every person had roles and responsibilities in their communities, and languages to explain these, everyone belonged and knew who they were. Each individual had a strong sense of identity, both inside and outside of themselves.

Today, Indigenous, or Aboriginal, Peoples, are one of the fastest growing groups in Canada. According to the Canadian Constitution, there are three groups of Indigenous Peoples, Indians or First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Those who identify as Métis trace their ancestry to First Nations and European colonial ancestors and have their own distinct culture and language (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Kahetonni-Phillips, & Jessen-Williamson, 2011). The Inuit once lived on the Arctic shores of North America in small extended family groups, and many continue to do so today (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

According to the latest national census, there are about 1.2 million Indigenous Peoples in Canada, 4% of the national population. This population grew about 45% between 1996 and 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2010), meaning that it has been growing at a rate of six times greater than the general Canadian population. This rise is caused by high fertility rates and more Indigenous Peoples self-identifying as such (Norris & Clatworthy, 2003). The population is also a youthful one, with over 50% under the age of 25 years, and 54% live in urban settings (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Imposed names have been forced upon Indigenous Peoples, which racializes them and creates artificial categories of identities. In addition, First Nations are divided into two categories—status and non-status. It is not Indigenous Peoples who have coined these identity markers, but rather a history of legislation that does so (Chartrand, 2012). Such naming by the settler governments in Canada began when they first labeled the original inhabitants “Indians” in the Act for the Better Protection of the Lands and Property of the Indians in Lower Canada in 1850 (Bourassa, 2009). The definition was broad and based on race and blood. The Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 did not change the definition, but allowed an Indian male to become enfranchised, which meant he would have the same rights as other people in Canada, such as the right to vote (Chartrand, 2012). However, it also meant that the man and his family forfeited their Indian status, and the woman could not regain hers unless she married another Indian man with status.
Clearly, patriarchy has played a major role in the colonized identities of Indigenous Peoples and was further reinforced with the Gradual Enfranchisement Act of 1869, whereby a woman’s status was taken away from her and her children should she marry a non-Indian man or an Indian man who was non-status. However, if an Indian man married a non-Indian woman, he kept his status and passed it over to the woman and any of their children. In 1876, the first Indian Act continued this discrimination while also automatically enfranchising anyone who achieved post-secondary education, became a professional or clergy of any kind or lived outside of the country for five years or more (Bourassa, 2009). The Indian Registry, created as a revision to the Indian Act of 1951, meant that, to keep one’s status, one’s name had to be written in the Registry (Bourassa, 2009; RCAP, 1996). Many names were left out, which meant fewer people with status, thereby making the state less fiscally responsible for them.

The rule that a woman’s status was taken away from her upon marrying a non-Indian man or an Indian man who was non-status was challenged at the United Nations in 1981, resulting in the creation of Bill C-31 in 1985, which removed this obvious gender discrimination (Bourassa, 2009; RCAP, 1996). However, to this day, the situation is not completely remedied, since change still relies on past status and policies and provisions that create two categories of status Indians (RCAP, 1996). Indigenous Peoples have never been the ones to explain their existence or identify themselves once contact with outsiders began. Of note is the fact that the Indian Act stands as one of the few pieces of race-based legislation remaining in the Western world (Allan & Smylie, 2015).

**History and Present Day Impacts of Colonization**

The history of this country is often hidden and misrepresented. Colonization has been, and continues to be, an ongoing process of deliberate displacement, cultural violence, and systemic oppression targeted at Indigenous Peoples. The foundations of this country were built on the seizure of land and resources, and the imposition of foreign political, economic, educational, and religious structures on the original people of this land. “The global impact of racial colonialism and [the] justification of capitalist systems to exploit, marginalize, and colonize people of color and Indigenous peoples are taken for granted as an invisible norm that hardly anyone examines for its current day consequences” (Yee, 2015, p. 3).

Settler governments rendered the First Peoples of these territories unable to claim territorial rights, which was necessary for the advancement of the settler state (Crosby & Monaghan, 2012). The use of the doctrine of terra nullius, “the principle of ‘empty lands’, asserting that North America was not populated by humans before the arrival of Europeans” is evidence of early attacks on Indigenous Peoples (Alfred, 2009, p. 45). The creation of early treaties between European and Indigenous Peoples often promised land and educational, financial, and infrastructural resources that were never delivered, and the land that was reserved for Indigenous Peoples was never enough to sustain future
generations (Alfred, 2009; Allan & Smylie, 2015). Furthermore, highly restrictive guidelines regarding agriculture contributed to the desolation of practices that were crucial to Indigenous sustainability and connection to the land (Alfred, 2009; Allan & Smylie, 2015).

In addition, the imposition of Band Council structures “promoted hierarchical, male-dominated, political, economic, and social structures that led to the disintegration of traditional tribal structures, which were clan-oriented and based on the concepts of the extended family and collectivity” (Baskin, 2011, p. 4). These patriarchal structures had devastating effects on the traditional roles of women and two-spirit peoples as leaders and sacred persons in their families and communities (Allan & Smylie, 2015). Countless attacks on land, community, and identity are at the root of the plight facing many Indigenous communities today, including housing shortages, lack of clean water, lack of access to education, and inadequate health care (Allan & Smylie, 2015).

**Historical Role of Social Work with Indigenous Peoples**

Social work is meant to be a helping profession; however, historically, it has not been so with Indigenous Peoples. The over-surveillance of Indigenous Peoples is not a thing of the past, nor is the trauma experienced by so many. Prior to colonization, Indigenous communities had their own systems of justice, education, and childcare that were developed and passed down through many generations. Notably, Blackstock (2009) states that responses to concerns about child safety never resulted in severance of the parent-child relationship, nor did they signal an end to parental roles and responsibilities. However, since confederation, social workers have been complicit in repeated attacks on Indigenous cultural and traditional systems by removing children from their families and communities.

Beginning in the 1870s, residential schools were established, and the separation of Indigenous children from their families and communities quickly became a widespread practice (Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004; Sinha et al., 2011; Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). Physical, spiritual, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse were rampant in the schools, resulting in trauma, disease, damage to cultures, and the death of many children (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Sinha et al., 2011; Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). This attempted cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada is evident in the attacks on languages, culture, and traditions (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Baskin, 2011, 2015; Sinclair, 2004; Sinha et al., 2011). Social workers participated in this process through their assistance with child apprehensions as well as by ignoring the conditions and treatment of children within the schools (Blackstock, 2009; Sinha et al., 2011). For decades, despite reports and complaints describing horrific accounts of abuse, there was no large-scale intervention on the part of child welfare or human rights groups (Blackstock, 2009; Nagy & Sehdev, 2012; Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). As Blackstock (2009) points out, there is evidence in the form of “a joint submission to the Senate and House of Commons in 1946 from the Canadian
Association of Social Workers (CASW) and the Canadian Welfare Council (CWC) indicate that social workers were well aware of the residential schools” (p. 29).

Later on, when residential schools began closing their doors in the mid-1900s, the child welfare system took up many of the assimilative and genocidal practices that the schools were guilty of (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Baskin, 2011, 2015; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004). This mass removal of Indigenous children, who were apprehended and placed far from their families and communities, became known as “the sixties scoop” as the number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system shot up from less than one percent to over thirty percent between 1959 and the late 1960s (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004, 2009). There were several factors contributing to the onset of “the sixties scoop.” On the coattails of the closures of residential schools, legislative changes allowed child welfare agencies to gain jurisdiction over First Nations children in their communities (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004; Sinha et al., 2011). Lack of respect for customary care traditions held by many Indigenous communities led to deeming Indigenous families unfit when they did not conform to Euro-centric family norms (Blackstock, 2009; Sinha et al., 2011; Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). New funding for child welfare involvement with Indigenous Peoples saw the development of financial incentives for out-of-home placements for children, which resulted in poor screening practices, leading to lives of abuse and servitude for many (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Sinha et al., 2011).

The impacts of residential school and child welfare experiences are at the root of symptoms such as substance misuse, poverty, suicide, and a cycle of abuse and violence within many First Nations communities (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Baskin, 2011, 2015; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004). Moreover, many survivors of these systems developed an inability to care for others as they had not experienced any nurturing themselves (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004; Sinha et al., 2011). No consideration on the part of social workers, for culturally relevant placements or continuity, resulted in the ongoing deterioration of Indigenous communities. Hence, it is not without reason that many Indigenous Peoples have developed great mistrust of and resentment towards social workers.

**Social Work with Indigenous Peoples Today**

Indigenous Peoples in Canada today, both in First Nations communities and urban centers, face enormous social and economic difficulties due to the impacts of colonization (Baskin, 2011; Sookraj, Hutchinson, Evans, & Murphy, 2010). The decades of trauma that they have experienced is referred to as “historical trauma” or “collective trauma,” as it involves Indigenous Peoples as an entire group (Baskin, 2011; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). No one escaped the impacts of colonization, even if they did not experience abuse directly in the residential school system or were apprehended by the child welfare system. For those who have
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experienced the latter, via adoption by White people, their trauma has been referred to as the “split feather syndrome” (Carriere, 2007).

Several research projects have focused on the concerns of what is seen as cross-cultural adoption with consistent findings—loss is always the core concern, with identity as the major loss (Bertsch & Bidgood, 2010; Blackstock, 2009; Blackstock et al., 2006; Carriere, 2007; Sinclair, 2009). However, this loss “is not about race, colour or national origin; it is about the preservation of First Nation self-determination within a continuing colonial context” (Carriere, 2007, p. 49). Of course, this needs to be extended to Métis and Inuit as well, with the acknowledgement that simply providing culturally appropriate services for Indigenous children will not address the issues of racism and poverty, which are at the heart of children being adopted in the first place (Baskin, 2007b; Carriere, 2007).

Why is social work with Indigenous Peoples so focused on removing children from their families and communities? Part of this lies within conflicting sets of values whereby mainstream child welfare sees the best interests of the child as foremost with little regard to the family and community, whereas in Indigenous worldviews, the emphasis is on the collective, meaning that the wellbeing of everyone is the focus (Baskin, 2011; Blackstock, 2009; Blackstock et al., 2006; Carriere, 2007; Goodwill & McCormick, 2012). Thus, biased values are used to assess whether or not Indigenous families can care for their children. For example, mainstream standards for customary/foster care and adoptive homes, such as space, financial abilities and past child welfare or legal involvement, will likely disqualify many Indigenous families from adopting children.

When adoptions break down, as they often do, about 85% tend to be viewed by child welfare as personality problems (Sinclair, 2007). The reasoning goes that poor matching between the Indigenous child and the adoptive family, which causes stressful relationships, are more significant to the wellbeing of children and youth than any systemic problem (Carriere, 2007; Sinclair, 2009). The obvious flaw with such reasoning is the problem of knowing ahead of time whether one's personality will conflict with an Indigenous child or youth when they are adopted as toddlers, babies, or even at birth.

Recommendations from Indigenous scholars regarding child welfare with Indigenous Peoples emphasize the need for changes to legislation and polices in addition to front line practices. Carriere (2007, p. 57) advocates that:

1. The legislation on adoption of First Nation children needs to be explored further. At minimum, it needs to be open.
2. Customary adoption requires further support.
3. The rights of adoptees to receive all information about their identity, extended family, and community of origin need to be defined further in adoption legislation, policy, and standards.

Similarly, the research of Bertsch and Bidgood (2010) finds that participants
consider current adoption policy inadequate due to Eurocentric, colonial philosophies guiding adoption procedures [and] recommended [that] mandated adoption policies follow a consensual model involving . . . family, community, and government decision-makers . . . [as well as] widespread social worker efforts for solutions within [families] before adopting their children to “outsiders” (p. 102).

From child welfare, to health services, to counselling, the literature based on the research of Indigenous scholars is consistent about what is not working and what needs to be done. The main problem when non-Indigenous social workers work with Indigenous Peoples is that they overlook the Indigenous persons’ beliefs and values and instead use approaches to social work they assume to be universal. Thus, the role that worldviews and cultures play in problem identification, their causes,, and possible solutions to them is often disregarded (Baskin, 2007A, 2011). Approaches within mainstream social work that may not fit with Indigenous worldviews are:

- Individualistic rather than a community-based focus;
- Strictly talk therapy instead of holistic methods;
- Adhering to strict professional boundaries rather than more flexible ones; and
- Ignoring spirituality instead of seeing it as a strength (Baskin, 2007A, 2011; Goodwill & McCormick, 2012; Sookraj et al., 2010).

In addition, mainstream perspectives within social work, on the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples as social services recipients, continue to focus on an individual deficit discourse, rather than a lens of racism and colonization (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Mohatt, Thompson, Thai, & Tebes, 2014; Yee, 2015). Such cases are not simply the fault of individual social workers if they have not had opportunities to critically examine their values and attitudes while acquiring necessary knowledge to work with Indigenous Peoples. Nevertheless, conscious or unconscious, these shortcomings lead to mistrust and fear for Indigenous service users, most of whom then prefer services from Indigenous agencies where their cultures will be respected, their experiences acknowledged, and relationships developed (Sookraj et al., 2010).

There is a need to conduct further research with Indigenous Peoples from a strengths-based approach, as findings thus far indicate that cultural strengths and pride of identity are protective of holistic health. For instance, health promotion that includes developing a politicized identity and resistance against colonial practices have been linked to overall positive health for Indigenous youth (Anderson, Smylie, Anderson, Sinclair, & Crengle, 2006; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Clark & Hunt, 2011; Clark et al., 2013). Furthermore, research also consistently shows how a stronger cultural identity helps reduce depression, suicide, drug use, and emotional stress in adolescents, while culture, family, and community shape identity in positive ways (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler & Lalonde, 2009; Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol & Hallett, 2003; Goodwill & McCormick, 2012; Clark et al. (2013) concluded in their research that:
The health of urban Aboriginal youth must be addressed in models that are based on Indigenous traditions, belief systems, and local knowledge that incorporate spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical health. Let us not promote any one model with a fixed concept of Indigeneity [or] gender role (p. 53).

Such a caution is important, of course, since identity in a constantly changing world speaks to how cultures and traditions are not static, but rather are always evolving. Hence, these are not the foundational markers of who one is.

There are also scholars, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are re-thinking models of cultural competency, cultural safety, resilience and generalist practice in terms of their applicability to Indigenous social work. In attempts to address “diversity” amongst service users, the social work profession has implemented cultural competence which directs social workers to become more aware of, and sensitive to, norms, practices, and behaviors of “cultural” and “ethnic” groups (Hines, Garcia-Preto, McGoldrick, Almeida, & Weltman, 1999; McGoldrick, 1982). This model was the popular method of taking up “difference “in social work during the 1980s and 1990s and continues to be taught, written about, and practiced in some areas of the profession (Jeffery, 2005). Some Indigenous scholars have critiqued this model, believing that it reproduces simplistic assumptions about Indigenous populations that are reminiscent of the imperialism and paternalism of an earlier social work era (Baskin, 2011; Jeffery, 2005, 2009; Miller & Maiter, 2008; Pon, 2009). In terms of education, Ramsden (2003) notes that courses focused on cultural competency are designed to sensitize students “to formal ritual rather than the emotional, social, economic, and political content in which people exist” (p. 116). Without an understanding of these complexities, notions about cultures can become simplified, and social work practitioners can fall into the trap of viewing culture as the only variable in the lives of Indigenous individuals, families, and communities.

Cultural safety, as a model within social work, is promising because it is the only model that calls itself “cultural” while emphasizing that safe services can only be defined by those who are receiving the services (Ramsden, 2003). Thus, cultural safety may be a model that has a role to play, not only in offering social services to Indigenous Peoples, but also in decolonization. Exploring cultural safety as a promising model may also enhance critical approaches to social work with Indigenous populations. For example, as relevant as an anti-oppressive framework (AOP) is in social work with Indigenous Peoples, it only goes so far (Baskin, 2011). This is not a critique of AOP, as it is not intended to take up Indigenous knowledge, nor should it. AOP primarily presents a true image of the world we live in, which is of critical importance, but we need Indigenous practices to assist us in how we resist, and heal from, the impacts of oppression.

In the past, resilience in the area of working with Indigenous Peoples has focused on individual coping mechanisms in the face of adversity (Kirmayer et al., 2011). However, given the importance of the family and community within Indigenous worldviews, resilience needs to have a collective dimension. This is supported by Kirmayer et al.
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(2011), which finds that stories of resilience consistently make reference to values and draw on collective history and teachings. As these researchers report:

... many communities are strengthening individual and collective agency through political activism, empowerment, and reconciliation. Active engagement or success in political negotiations such as land claims or the search for other forms of recognition of rights and identity not only brings material benefits but also enhances collective and individual self-esteem and is associated with better mental health. Collective efficacy strengthens individual efficacy and so makes individuals feel more capable of addressing their own needs (p. 89).

In this context, changing the word “resilience” to “resistance” on the part of Indigenous communities seems more fitting.

Some Indigenous social work academics and practitioners believe that generalist social work approaches can be implemented for working with Indigenous Peoples as long as they include Indigenous worldviews and practices. According to Nabigon and Wenger-Nabigon (2012):

... with thought and focus, any helper trained in CBI [Cognitive Behavioral Theory] or knowledgeable about GST [General Systems Theory], or Family Systems Theory, can see how all of this knowledge is already carried by [Indigenous] traditions ... Assessment, treatment planning, therapy strategies, and follow-up care can all be built around the structure of the teachings, and incorporate knowledge, strategies, and techniques from other theoretical positions (p. 50).

It appears, then, that some mainstream approaches to social work can be combined with Indigenous ones in providing services for Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Approaches to Social Work

The theories of anti-colonialism and post-colonialism as resistance against colonial forces applies to all people who live within the colonial state. Colonialism and decolonization are not only Indigenous issues, they are Canadian issues. Anti-colonialism calls on all of us to challenge those who have power in our society, to question where the right to hold that power comes from, and to recognize the ongoing nature of colonialism. It is a practice of educating; it is also an active undoing of, and resistance against, colonial practices entrenched in our political, economic, and social systems. Implementing anti-colonialism or post-colonialism is also about acknowledging the strengths and contributions of Indigenous Peoples. Baskin (2011) explains:

The post-colonial dialogue examines Eurocentric Western thinking and colonization from the world view of the people who have been colonized. This
dialogue can provide a language and concepts that may help explain the experiences of people who have been, and/or continue to be, colonized (p. 53).

One approach to anti-colonialism is decolonizing by indigenizing. This involves privileging Indigenous voices in the transmission of their approaches and practices to helping. It also means ensuring that Indigenous Peoples occupy leadership roles in the development of curriculum in post-secondary institutions that represents their knowledge and how it will be taught. Furthermore, Indigenous Peoples must be at the forefront of social services agencies and programming that are based on their approaches to helping.

By creating space for Indigenous approaches to social work and by recognizing their effectiveness and the healing they foster, it can be seen that “Aboriginal communities, when provided with adequate supports, develop the most sustainable socio-economic improvements for children” (Blackstock, 2009, p. 33). In addition, Indigenous approaches, which utilize tools such as circle work and community engagement, and involve Elders, Traditional Teachers, and Medicine People, have proven to be helpful social work practice in many Indigenous communities (Absolon, 2009; Baskin, 2011; Nabigon & Wenger-Nabigon, 2012; Thomas & Green, 2007).

Spirituality is central within Indigenous approaches to helping. Hart states that spirituality is “a central pillar [and] respected in all interactions” which includes relationships amongst service providers and service users (p. 35). Indigenous perspectives on spirituality, as understood by Baskin (2011), include “a respect for life and an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all beings . . . and the Earth herself” (p. 147). This interconnectedness is also seen in the importance of community and familial ties (Absolon, 2009).

The significance of relationships and connections among all living things is seen in the Medicine Wheel, a traditional and ancient interpretive tool that reflects the (w)holistic nature of Indigenous worldviews. The interconnectedness of the spiritual, emotional, physical, and psychological aspects of a person must all be considered when attempting to address imbalance within an individual, a family, or a community (Absolon, 2009; Baskin, 2011). Healing is manifested through the interconnectedness between persons and the world around them, which contributes to a greater sense of belonging within, and relationship to, one’s world (Baskin, 2011).

An example of Indigenous approaches in practice is Anishnaabe Health Toronto (AHT), a fully accredited, multi-disciplinary community health center located in Toronto, Ontario. Working from a traditional and culturally-based framework, AHT provides access to a (w)holistic approach to healing. AHT’s mission statement emphasizes how they aim “to improve the health and well-being of Aboriginal People in spirit, mind, emotion, and body by providing Traditional Healing” (AHT, 2015, para.1). Practitioners include Elders and Medicine People, physicians, nurses, naturopaths, massage therapists, and dentists as well as traditional pre-and-postnatal services and family counseling.
Indigenous approaches to helping and healing are also being utilized within the criminal justice system. In contrast to the largely punitive mainstream justice system, Indigenous healing lodges provide a different approach to custodial corrections. Included in programming are traditional cultural and spiritual ceremonies, teachings, and counseling (Correctional Service Canada, 2013). One such lodge is the Okimaw Ohci [Thunder Hills] Healing Lodge, located in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan. Guiding principles of this lodge include restoring pride, dignity, hope, and sense of worth, while rebuilding families and communities (Correctional Service Canada, 2013). The Nekaneet Horse Program, offered at Okimaw Ohci, focuses on addressing grief and connecting with self, language, spirituality and ceremony, through developing an understanding of the spirituality of the horse and its role in Cree culture (Correctional Service Canada, 2013).

Development of more Indigenous institutions and agencies, such as AHT and Okimaw Ohci, sufficient funding increases, and shifts toward self-governance are necessary steps in the ongoing incorporation of Indigenous approaches to social work. Further, operating from an anti-colonial perspective, both in the development and implementation of these programs, will allow a shift from the perspective of Indigenous peoples as “problems” to a strengths-based perspective.

Challenges to Implementing Indigenous Social Work

As welcoming as diverse cultures within Indigenous communities in urban centers are, this can also present challenges as to how to deliver services. People from diverse First Nations, who have their own languages, protocols, and practices, reside in cities across the country. In addition, people are on a continuum from regularly practicing their traditional beliefs to not practicing them at all. Some Indigenous Peoples belong to various religious denominations, while others are atheists.

Urban Indigenous social services agencies must service all Indigenous Peoples in multiple areas such as health, advocacy, trauma counseling, and education. Because “there is no way that we could provide culturally appropriate services to every different group,“ what has emerged are various “pan Indigenous” approaches that are applied to all or a mix of cultural practices from the local First Nations communities surrounding the urban center (Sookraj et al., 2010, p. 45). However, regardless of the approach, the focus is on client-centeredness and relationship building, even when mainstream practices are implemented or when service users are referred to mainstream agencies (Sookraj et al., 2010).

Another challenge for those who offer services to Indigenous Peoples is the implementation of what is called “culturally appropriate” services. Although this term is referred to in the majority of the literature about services for Indigenous Peoples (Sookraj et al., 2010), there is little written about what it means (Sookraj et al., 2010). Researchers, such as Sookraj et al. (2010), suggest that without a thorough
understanding of this term and what it means to service delivery, it will be challenging not only for agencies, but also for sources of funding and mainstream social services to create and implement accountability standards and measures that are culturally appropriate. This is an important area for further research, especially as more and more services come under the control of Indigenous Peoples.

Funding for social services is an ongoing struggle in many ways. The amount of funding for urban services has not kept up with the rapid growth of Indigenous Peoples living in them. Many agencies have several different funding sources with different sets of accountability requirements, thereby creating a huge administrative burden on already stretched service providers (Sookraj et al., 2010). In addition, many agencies are left uncertain as to whether or not services will continue or if service providers will have jobs when the time-limited projects are completed (Sookraj et al., 2010). How can agencies make long-term plans under these limitations?

Other daunting challenges are the lack of “qualified” Indigenous Peoples to deliver services and run agencies, and how overworked and stressed these service providers typically are. Being trained in a social work academic program is rapidly becoming an expectation for Indigenous helpers. In many cases, these helpers have much lived experience in common with those they are servicing, as well as several years of front line practice. Such helpers include Elders, Traditional Teachers, and Medicine People, all of who are doing exceptional work within Indigenous communities and urban centers. For those and other Indigenous Peoples, there are many barriers to gaining a social work degree, including lack of funds, having to leave home, family responsibilities, and an educational system that offers little relevant learning or knowledge that speaks to them and their world. These barriers must be eliminated, or at least lessened, in order for a critical mass of Indigenous Peoples to access university education. Furthermore, the question of who is “qualified” to be a helper needs to be examined. In Indigenous worldviews, it is the Elders, who carry the knowledge, and the Medicine People, who heal, that are most revered and respected. Thus, they are the most qualified people. Unfortunately, policy makers and funders do not agree, so Indigenous communities and agencies are not always able to provide the services that people want and need.

Other challenges taken up in the literature by Indigenous academics, researchers, and practitioners include the depth of need that service users have, vicarious trauma, addressing structural issues, maintaining healthy boundaries, and lack of privacy (Brown & Fraehlich, 2011; Baskin, 2015, Sookraj et al., 2010). Brown and Fraehlich (2011) synthesizes the findings from their research in this area as:

The staff characteristic of being both a community member and service provider is rooted in cultural ways of helping and essential to make service relevant, appropriate and effective. This greatest strength also poses some important challenges for identifying the issues and dealing with difficulties that arise (p. 24).
Such challenges are recounted in Absolon (2009), where the author comments about being a social worker in her home community. She speaks about having “multiple relationships with people I worked with” and that service users could “be a combination of our friends, relatives, relatives of friends, Elders, leaders, or other helpers” (p. 188). She goes on in more detail, explaining that:

When working “at home,” the multi-layered relationships are a reality, and there is no such thing as objectivity or anonymity because everyone knows where you live and who you are . . . In the evenings or on weekends, I would have people knock on my door and I would serve them tea and talk about whatever was on their mind . . . Sometimes people would arrive on my doorstep late at night seeking support, a drive home or a safe place to sleep . . . People trusted me because I belonged there too. Sometimes, though, it was difficult to find a balance and establish healthy boundaries for myself and family (p. 188–189).

Because of the belief that every individual is connected to both family and community, and if injustice happens to one, it happens to all, every Indigenous community, including those in urban centers, has experienced multiple losses and inequitable treatment by governments and mainstream society in general. Yet, the limited amount of funding received by social services is typically only intended for the symptoms of individual people, such as substance misuse and mental health challenges, rather than addressing the causes of such ongoing impacts. Further research, conducted by Indigenous Peoples, is needed for greater understanding of the experiences of Indigenous social workers and other helpers in order to advocate for positive change at the community and structural levels.

Non-Indigenous Social Workers as Allies

Every Canadian needs to be part of decolonization, which is a process of learning, acknowledging and taking action. No one here today is responsible for the past, but all have benefited from it. Every one of us is responsible for making positive change today and in the future. The profession of social work can be one of the leaders in the decolonization process because it is involved in the lives of so many Indigenous Peoples. Some non-Indigenous social work educators and practitioners have begun this journey. They are the ones that Indigenous Peoples call allies.

There has been a recent shift in social work from conventional approaches to an anti-oppressive framework in working with Indigenous Peoples. This framework requires critical reflexivity that takes up how mainstream values and beliefs are viewed as superior to all others (Carniol, 2010; Cowie, 2010; Nabigon & Wenger-Nabigon, 2012; White, 2007). This framework is also about social workers sharing their power with service users, which is beginning to be recognized as good social work practice (Carniol, 2010). It also means standing in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples, letting go of the expert stance and neutral observer position, and becoming a constant learner, so one can
support Indigenous Peoples to make the best decisions for their communities—since they are the only ones who can do so (Blackstock, 2009; Cowie, 2010; White, 2007).

Bishop (2015), a work on how to be an ally, emphasizes that social workers must not fall into the trap of over-personalizing their responsibilities, which can lead to internalizing feelings of guilt. Guilt is a useless feeling in the work of becoming an ally as it disempowers people, rendering them unable to do the necessary work. In understanding their role in oppression, social workers need to view it through a structural lens whereby they see themselves as “part of a collective where systemic oppression and marginalization are produced and maintained” (Cowie, 2010, p. 49). If they see their roles and responsibilities in the ongoing colonization of Indigenous Peoples as a collective one, they will see the undoing of it as a collective journey as well.

Educational institutions can be significant allies in educating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Since the need for Indigenous social workers is great, Indigenous Peoples need to know how the educational system is responding to this and be able to assist in the development of building greater capacity to increase the number of Indigenous professionals (Sookraj et al., 2010). It is also vitally important that non-Indigenous social work educators and practitioners take up the responsibility of educating others about what they are learning as allies. It is unacceptable that Indigenous Peoples be the only ones to have to do this.

Certainly, there has been movement within some schools of social work at Canadian universities to incorporate Indigenous approaches to helping and healing. This includes not only the hiring of Indigenous scholars, but also extending invitations to Elders, Knowledge Keepers, social workers, and service users to share their wisdom and experiences with students both in and outside of the classroom. Also of great significance is the fact that Indigenous ways of helping have much to offer the profession of social work in general (Baskin, 2011; Carniol, 2010; Koptie, 2009). According to Thoms (2007), Indigenous Peoples’:

. . . knowledge and multiple skill sets would greatly serve Canadians wanting to do community healing social work at home or abroad where populations are struggling to heal from oppression, repression, state created poverty, and political marginalization. Indigenous scholars must inform future generations in the Canadian social science workforce about divergent perspectives and help scholars shift from best practices to wise practices (p. 37).

When it comes to practice, the majority of the literature highlights the need to strengthen relationships between Indigenous and mainstream social services agencies (Baskin, 2011; Carniol, 2010; Sinclair, 2009; Sookraj et al., 2010). This is cited as particularly important for services in urban centers. Partnerships and reconciliation processes have been articulated and emphasized perhaps best by the work of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCSC). According to Cowie (2010), the FNCFCSC:
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... has developed a process for reconciliation in the child welfare system that presents an opportunity for the social work profession to engage with First Nations communities in a meaningful and effective way. The first phase in the reconciliation process involves truth telling, or open exchanges about the history of child welfare. This process involves the participation of both those affected by the child welfare system, as well as those involved in administering its policies. The profession of social work must make itself accountable to the history of harm that it has perpetuated as a first step in moving forward to create a system based on social justice and inclusive of Indigenous values, culture and knowledge (p. 47).

It seems the way forward is to bring relevant research to social workers and policy makers to assist in decision-making processes regarding Indigenous Peoples and communities, and to provide opportunities for partnerships between practitioners and academics. In this way, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic researchers could work together to create the best knowledge available. If given the time and enough information, social workers could identify what scholarship is most useful to them and their work, as well as provide practice-focused questions that they need to have answered by researchers and Indigenous Peoples.

Conclusion

Indigenous social work scholars, researchers, and practitioners are taking the lead in social work education and practice in uncovering systemic causes for the ongoing marginalization that Indigenous families and communities face. Indigenous perspectives, with an anti-colonial/post-colonial theoretical underpinning, expose the hidden history of colonization and its current impacts. More importantly, these worldviews contain the teachings and practices that guide how Indigenous Peoples create their own helping processes, decolonizing and healing. Although only in the beginning stages, Indigenous knowledge within social work has much to offer this profession by way of the (w)holistic approaches that apply to all people who access social work education and practice.

Further Reading


Anishnawbe Health Toronto. *Our Mission*.

Anishnawbe Health Toronto. *Services*.


Baskin. (2007b). *Structural determinants as the cause of homelessness for Aboriginal youth*. *Critical social work, 8*(1).


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