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Anti-oppressive social work practice in child welfare: Journeys of reconciliation

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Abstract

This article explores the journey of reconciliation, both personal and professional, required for the social work profession to shed its history of colonialism in the context of its relationship with Canada's Indigenous People, particularly in the realm of child welfare. This process involves becoming accountable for past harms such as the residential school system, the mass removal of children during the '60's scoop', as well as the contemporary over-representation of Indigenous children in Canada's child welfare system. Further, this process demands that non-Indigenous social workers locate their privilege in order to become effective allies and partners along this path of reconciliation.

Introduction

The social work profession's history with Canada's First Nations People is plagued with harmful contacts embedded within colonial and assimilationist ideologies and agendas. Child welfare policies and practices such as the residential school system, as well as the systemic apprehension of First Nations children in the second half of the last century, known as the 60's scoop, continue to impact upon the lives of families and communities. The current child welfare system continues to apprehend First Nations children at a disproportionate and alarming rate. The profession must hold itself accountable to this legacy of injustice as a first step in the process of reconciliation. Further, social work discourse must move beyond conceptions of cultural competence that frame cultural diversity as problematic, towards perspectives that not only legitimate, but also actively engages with and supports Indigenous knowledge and ways of being. Social workers must also embark upon this journey as individuals in order to locate their own personal histories, privilege and power within the system that continues to impact heavily upon the lives of First Nations People. This process of critical systemic and self-reflection is necessary in order for non-Indigenous social workers to become allies with First Nations families and communities, and essential in order to build relationships upon trust, reciprocity and social justice.

History of Social Work with First Nations People

The history of social work with First Nations People is steeped in the legacy of colonialism and assimilation (Sinclair, 2004). The reservation system was created to physically isolate First Nations people, and the residential school system was a tool that furthered this isolation by attempting to eradicate the language, traditions and indigenous knowledge that is critical for the survival of culture. The mass removal and relocation of First Nations children, along with the abuse and maltreatment that occurred systemically at the schools, amounts to cultural genocide, the effects of which have impacted the physical, emotional, spiritual and economic well-being of people for generations that followed (Blackstock, 2009). The mass apprehension of First Nations children that followed the closure of residential schools furthered the colonial agenda, and the social work profession was intimately involved in this mass scooping of children starting in the 1960's (Sinclair, 2004). Currently, First Nations children continue to be over-represented in the child welfare system (Trocmé, Knoke & Shangreux, 2005), and so, the social work profession also continues to act as agents of colonialism and oppression. Blackstock (2009), argues that the social work profession insulates itself by rationalizing its past and contemporary history of injustice by "the propensity to believe that if we are all well intended in our actions, regardless of consequences, social workers are substantially absolved from moral responsibility" (Blackstock, 2009, pg. 34). Social workers must be aware of the context of this history, as their First Nations clients are likely to have experienced the impacts of these interactions either directly or inter-generationally (Sinclair, 2004).

Reconciliation in the Child Welfare System

The impacts of the residential school system, as well as the mass removal of children from their families and communities continue to affect the daily lives of First Nations people in Canada. Social work's role in perpetuating these injustices can no longer be ignored if the profession is to move forward and become partners in the healing and reconciliation that needs to occur. Due to their professional history associated with the '60's scoop', social workers are faced with negative stereotypes and according to Sinclair (2004), social work "is often synonymous with the theft of children, the destruction of families, and the deliberate oppression of Aboriginal communities" (Sinclair, 2004, pg.50). The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada 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 (Blackstock, 2009). The goal of this process is to acknowledge the mistakes of the past in order to create a system of child welfare based on principles of social justice and human rights that supports the intrinsic right of First Nations People to care for their children and to be the authors of their destiny and cultural identities (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown & Formsma, 2006). 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 definition of harm must be acknowledged to be the first property of those who experienced it, just as acknowledging the harm and learning from it is the first obligation of those who perpetrated it" (Blackstock et al., 2006, pg. 9). 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. The process

of reconciliation must not only occur at the organizational level, but social workers themselves must also take this journey.

Individual Journeys

If social workers are to practice anti-oppressively, they must first understand their roles as oppressors in order to create a space for deeper empathy and understanding. Anne Bishop (2002) argues that ignorance to oppression simply compounds the issue, and that our experiences as oppressors are often difficult to locate because our privilege is often invisible. According to her, “all members of this society grow up surrounded by oppressive attitudes; we are marinated in it. It runs in our veins; it is as invisible to us as the air we breathe” (Bishop, 2002, pg. 114). In the context of non-indigenous social workers in Canada, it is white colonial privilege that must be located within the political, economic and social systems in which they operate. Whiteness, the set of social meanings produced by political, cultural and historical forces is inextricably linked to notions of normalization and dominance, and is the site where marginalization of the ‘Other’ occurs (Jeffery, 2005; Jeffery, 2009; Park, 2005). Whiteness continues to be the marker by which other groups are defined in terms of their distance from the norm. Privilege, then is related in part to possessing the norms and values of the dominant group, as well as the seemingly invisible ways by which membership provides anonymity and unearned power and opportunities (McIntosh, 1990). Further, it is crucial that individuals also examine the ways in which they benefit politically and economically from the oppression of others. It is necessary for non-indigenous social workers to understand the ways that they continue to profit from the colonization of Canada and assimilation practices such as the residential school system, as well as the continued failure to fully implement and recognize First Nations rights as enshrined in the treaties.

The process of unearthing one’s privilege as well as contributions to and continued benefits from the oppression of others requires critical reflexivity. This process extends beyond introspection about how one’s personal values and beliefs affect the ways in which we relate to others, but directly challenges the legitimacy of the knowledge systems upon which these values and beliefs are based (White, 2007). In the context of social workers in the child welfare system, this means not only understanding how one’s own experience of white-Anglo parenting or family values may impact upon understandings of First Nations families, but challenging the assumption that the latter can be measured in any way against the former. According to White (2007), when social workers socially locate themselves in this way “we directly challenge the myth of the neutral observer. The process also invites us to give up our expert positions in exchange for more open, relational, collaborative, and accountable practices” (White, 2007, pg. 216).

This process of exposing and challenging one’s role in and profit derived from the oppression of others is necessarily a difficult and painful task. In order to truly understand and develop the capacity to empathize with the oppression and marginalization of First Nations People, non-indigenous social workers must deconstruct the expert piety that has allowed for the rationalization of past injustices and the professional inertia that currently exists in the context of over representation of First Nations children in the child welfare system (Blackstock, 2009). While critical reflexivity is certainly a personal journey, Bishop (2002) warns that it is important

that allies not over-personalize the issue and internalize feelings of guilt. Instead, understanding one's role in oppression should be examined within a structural framework where individuals are part of a collective where systemic oppression and marginalization are produced and maintained.

Moving Forward: Towards Reconciliation

While the process of critical reflexivity and taking accountability for past injustices perpetuated by social work is a long and difficult journey, it is not impossible. Anti-oppressive social work discourse has been criticized as being too theoretical in nature while elusive in practice (Jeffery, 2009), however the following suggestions for non-indigenous social workers represent tangible practice tools essential in anti-oppressive social work with First Nations People. Social workers need to maintain a learner's stance and a constant position of curiosity in terms of expanding their knowledge of First Nations culture, traditions and ways of being. Asking questions within and outside of the therapeutic relationship creates a space for meaningful dialogue and discovery (White, 2007). By asking First Nations clients, Elders and community members first hand about their culture and values, social workers can come to understand others through an unfiltered lens. In this way being curious and asking questions are an express mechanism for generating knowledge and experience. This process allows the social worker to understand the lived reality of clients, families and communities. Further, engaging in meaningful and reciprocal dialogue allows for collaborative meaning-making and joint-knowledge construction where the social worker is no longer the expert but rather a partner and an equal contributor (White, 2007).

Becoming an ally requires a shift in power within the social work relationship from a 'power-over' stance to a 'power-with' position (Bishop, 2002). Relationships that are built on trust and reciprocity are fundamental stepping stones in this shift. Caution must be taken however, that social workers do not take sole ownership of the solutions to the problem, but rather should invest in relationships with First Nations People in order to affirm and support their rights to make the best decisions affecting them (Blackstock, 2009). According to Bishop (2002), this may mean that the social worker "leave their process – working through their anger – to the oppressed group. Give your attention to your own process – becoming an ally" (Bishop, 2002, pg. 116).

Finally, the personal journey of exposing and challenging privilege and the oppression of others must not start and end at the professional level, but must extend into the realm of the social worker's daily life. It is not enough to simply uncover injustice, but social workers must think critically about their way of living and being, and become anti-oppressive warriors carrying a commitment to peace and transformation (Kundouq & Qwul'sih'yah'maht, 2009). Social workers must take a stance. This challenges the notion that the profession is value-free and neutral, but rather requires a personal and professional investment in the problems, and in their solutions:

As many Elders have said 'we did not get here alone and we are not leaving alone'. It does mean shifting the philosophy of our current social work practice from one of solution holder and service deliverer to one where Aboriginal peoples make the best decisions for themselves. Non Aboriginal peoples must play a critical and active role in

making space for those decisions and ensuring adequate resources are available to implement them (Blackstock, 2009, pg. 31).

Conclusion

Social work's relationship with First Nations People is firmly entrenched within the history of colonization and assimilation of Canada's First Peoples. This is evidenced by its involvement in the mass apprehension of children that continues today with devastating effects upon First Nations children, families and culture. Social work must hold itself accountable to this history in order for the journey of reconciliation with First Nations People to begin. The profession can no longer absolve itself from the harm that it continues to perpetuate within the child welfare system. This journey must also be taken up at the individual level, where social workers, particularly non-indigenous practitioners, are compelled to unearth and challenge their power, knowledge and privilege located within the social and political systems that intrude daily in the lives of their First Nations clients. Social workers must build relationships premised upon trust, reciprocity and equality in order for effective and meaningful change to take place. Becoming a social worker means taking on and shedding over a century of colonial baggage. This process is inevitably a difficult and highly personal journey that requires social workers to not only acknowledge the harm that has been done, but more fundamentally requires that social workers engage with and support First Nations People in an anti-oppressive way not only in their professional practice, but in their daily lives as well.

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