

# The sixties scoop in canada

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This paper examines issues concerning First Nations peoples and the child welfare system, and their implications for social work today. It explores the Sixties Scoop to illustrate the devastating impact such policies and practices had on Aboriginal children, families and communities. Cultural genocide is part of this legacy.

To deliver more culturally appropriate services, awareness about and acknowledgement of these mistakes can assist social workers to incorporate a social justice perspective into their practice with Aboriginal clients. As well, implications for social work education regarding professional training, curriculum content and course delivery by Aboriginal faculty members are highlighted. The Sixties Scoop: Implications for Social Workers and Social Work Education. Religious leaders and the government of Canada have apologized to First Nations peoples for the abusive experiences they endured in the residential school system. However, the closure of the residential schools did not end the attempt to assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream Anglo-Canadian society through separation from their families. A sudden acceleration in child welfare workers removing Native children from their Aboriginal communities coincided with the dismantling of the church run education system. As the next painful chapter in the history of the colonization of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the Sixties Scoop quickly evolved into an aggressive tool for assimilation and cultural genocide.

Its legacy has implications for social work practice today. Origins of the Sixties Scoop. Governments in the mid 20th century viewed Aboriginal people as "child-like creatures in constant need of the paternal care of the government. With guidance, they would gradually abandon their

superstitious beliefs and barbaric behaviour and adopt civilization” (Titley, 1992, p. 36). Segregated day and residential schools had failed to meet the goal of assimilation: most former students did not embrace the Euro-Canadian identity.

The Parliamentary committee examining the Indian Act between 1946 and 1948 rejected the existing policy and proposed Critical Social Work, 2010 Vol. 11, No. 1 54 Alston-O'Connor instead the integration of young Indians into public schools (Titley, 1992). Concurrently, the Department of Indian Affairs created agreements with the provinces to take primary responsibility for children’s general welfare within their own provincial agencies (Armitage, 1995). As residential schools became discredited, the child welfare system became the new agent of assimilation and colonization (Johnson, 1983).

Returning to their reserves and bands, many residential school students felt alienated and overwhelmed. Growing up in the residential school system, Aboriginal children were not given role models to look up to. They were not shown affection nor taught how to love or care for others. They had few traditional child-rearing skills from their own parents and relatives to rely on (Armitage, 1995). This had detrimental effects on the families of survivors of the residential schools for the generations of children who followed (Fournier and Crey, 1997).

During the era of the Sixties Scoop, Kulusic (2005) suggests that “ power, privilege and poverty are complexly related to the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children who were removed from their own communities” (p. 26). Unfamiliar with extended family child-rearing practices and communal values,  
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government social service workers attempted to 'rescue' children from their Aboriginal families and communities, devastating children's lives and furthering the destitution of many families.

Culture and ethnicity were not taken into consideration as it was assumed that the child, being pliable, would take on the heritage and culture of the foster/adoptive parents (Armitage, 1995). The forced removal of children and youth from their Native communities has been linked with social problems such as "high suicide rate, sexual exploitation, substance use and abuse, poverty, low educational achievement and chronic unemployment" (Lavell-Harvard and Lavell, 2006, p. 144).

Newly designated funds from the federal to the provincial governments were "the primary catalysts for state involvement in the well-being of Aboriginal children...as Ottawa guaranteed payment for each child apprehended" (Lavell-Harvard and Lavell, 2006, p. 145). Exporting Aboriginal children to the United States was common practice. Private American adoption agencies paid Canadian child welfare services \$5,000 to \$10,000 per child (Lavell-Harvard and Lavell, 2006). These agencies rarely went beyond confirming the applicant's ability to pay, resulting in minimal screening and monitoring of foster or adoptive parents (Fournier and Crey, 1997).

In 1959, only one percent of all children in care were of Native ancestry. By the late 1960s, "30 to 40 percent of all legal wards of the state in Canada were Aboriginal children, even though they formed less than 4 percent of the national population" (Fournier and Crey, 1997, p. 83). At the height of the Scoop, one in four status Indian children were separated from his or her parents for all or part of their childhood; for non-status and Metis children,

one in three spent part of their childhood as a legal ward of the state (Fournier and Crey, 1997).

Social welfare policies allowed government agencies to “ continue to remove Aboriginal children from their homes and communities and damage Aboriginal culture and traditions all the while claiming to act in the best interest of the child” (Johnson, 1983, p. 24). The permanent removal of thousands of Aboriginal children during the Sixties Scoop laid the foundation for more complex, destructive effects on First Nations communities and culture with repercussions extending beyond their lifetimes. Critical Social Work, 2010 Vol. 1, No. 1 55 Alston-O'Connor Cultural Genocide and Loss of Identity The loss of their children caused irrevocable mental, emotional and spiritual harm to individuals, families and communities. “ Indian children were taken away like souvenirs by professionals who were supposed to be helping the whole family” (Fournier and Crey, 1997, p. 91). The actions of child welfare workers destabilized traditional First Nations culture, quickly stereotyping Aboriginal women as unfit mothers and living off the land as uncivilized.

Welfare agencies played a very important role in “ defining, transmitting and shaping what were seen as legitimate or normal cultural expectations and practices” (Ward, 1984, p. 22). The acceptable home criteria reflected a nuclear, middle class lifestyle. Once an Aboriginal child was placed, social agencies did not offer support to the newly formed families even though research has shown that transracial adoption is more problematic because children lose their cultural heritage and their true identity (Kulusic, 2005).

Permanent estrangement from one's roots was inherent in the Sixties Scoop adoption structure. Aboriginal names, like postal codes, signify which First Nations their family belongs to (Cuthand, 2007). With legal adoptions, children's birth family names disappeared as the adoptive surname was issued on all records. Sealing their case files erased any past family history and made repatriation nearly impossible for the adopted child and their grieving families. Some reserves lost almost an entire generation of their children to the welfare system (Johnson, 1983).

Many children were placed in distant communities, exported to other provinces or across the US border to the homes of middle class white families (Kulusic, 2005). Scattering children across the continent undermined identification with the close-knit traditional Aboriginal culture and destroyed its kinship network. The legal rights of Aboriginal children were forgotten. With the erasure of their ancestry, the knowledge of being a treaty Indian child was suppressed. Special privileges available as a result of their Native status were lost through the apprehension and adoption process (Kimmelman, 1985).

In accordance with treaty rights, one might expect that child welfare agencies would place the child in a culturally appropriate environment, focused on healthy development as an Aboriginal child. Such considerations were routinely ignored (Kimmelman, 1985). This large-scale removal of Aboriginal children to non-native families throughout the 1960s and 1970s damaged the cultural legacy of all First Nations peoples. The long-term implementation and destructive intergenerational impacts of Canadian

government policies during the Sixties Scoop are consistent with the United Nations definition for cultural genocide.

Article 2 of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as, " any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (Office of the High Commissioner). Critical Social Work, 2010 Vol. 11, No. 1 56 Alston-O'Connor Under the misguided goal of assimilation, Aboriginal children were forcibly relocated to non-Aboriginal communities. Placements with families who could not offer socialization within an Aboriginal framework of traditional knowledge and pride of heritage destroyed one of the most important intergenerational processes for cultural knowledge and continuity. Individual Suffering and the Plight of the Family Many of the legal adoptions throughout the 1960s and 1970s were unsuccessful.

Alienated children became runaways, turned to street life for support and experienced an overwhelming sense of lost identity, " a sense of social isolation greater than that which they had experienced in the church-run schools" (York, 1990, p. 205). Anxiety and culture shock were common after moving from remote, rural areas into suburban settings to live with strangers. Many children had difficulties developing attachments to their new

parents, had an inability to connect and were distrustful (York, 1990). Some adults, adopted as children, reported physical, sexual and emotional abuses. Others were even treated as domestic servants (Fournier and Crey, 1997). Children are so highly valued in Aboriginal culture that those without children are considered disadvantaged (Johnson, 1983).

Research confirms that Native families who “ approached child care agencies in search of help for funds to supply food and shelter ended up losing their children ... Often times they were only offered one option: to relinquish custody of the child” (Kimmelman, 1985, p. 196). Problems of alcoholism, emotional stress and low self-esteem were compounded with the increased formal scrutiny and likelihood that other children would be removed from the family (Johnson, 1983). The actions of the social welfare agencies “ weakened the traditional family structure, and in doing so, weakened Aboriginal society as a whole” (Johnson, 1983, p. 61). Implications for Social Work Practice Today Client Contexts The impact of the Sixties Scoop is multi-layered.

Understanding the specific nature of this colonial oppression of Aboriginal peoples requires current social workers to incorporate a social justice perspective when addressing specific issues with Aboriginal clients. It provides insight into how the colonizing process has pressured people to “ detach from who they are but left them with no means to alleviate the pressure” (Hart, 2007, p. 27). In our role as counselors, this framework gives us the ability to reject assessment tools that merely label, personalize and pathologize individual expression and relate these problems to the larger socio-political reality (Hart, 2007). We are better prepared to identify how



media stereotypes and social prejudices translate into everyday life for thousands of First Nations people.

As Fournier and Crey (1997) note, the current generation is suffering the effects of hundreds of years of colonialist public policies. By situating the client's presenting problem in a societal context, we set the stage to identify strategies to offset the impoverishing effects of these social justice issues. As social workers, it is our ethical duty to look beyond individual risk factors and to change society's foundational inequalities and constraints (CASW, 2005). One of the ways to address the power imbalance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture is to incorporate Critical Social Work, 2010 Vol. 11, No. 1 57 Alston-O'Connor Indigenous knowledge.

Battiste (2002) argues it can only be fully learned and understood when learned in context, taught through Indigenous teaching methods, including sharing circles, experiential learning, meditation, prayer, ceremonies and story-telling. Thus social workers must become familiar with and support traditional healing processes. Hart (2007) believes "... if the helping professions respected Aboriginal perspectives, they would incorporate methodologies which directly address the effects of genocide, colonization and oppression. " (p. 31). Native Elders have been speaking about relationships between individuals, families, communities and the world around them for generations. They can serve as role models for positive growth and well being (Hart, 2007).

Their wisdom and knowledge can contribute support, direction and spiritual resources to aid both individual and collective problem solving and healing. Social workers must take an active role in encouraging direct participation in

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rituals and ceremonies with First Nations clients. The blessing of an event, attending a sweat lodge or going to a sharing circle establish oneness within the group and have symbolic importance. Spirituality and connecting with one's roots play a powerful role in building a strong sense of Aboriginal identity and hope. These practices are not part of a theoretical approach designed by academics to help Indigenous Peoples.

They are meaningful expressions of Aboriginal culture and need to be recognized as valid approaches within the helping process. Effective social work practice must support the self-determination of clients to choose traditional approaches and must not be limited by textbook theory or policy driven programs to resolve issues (Hart, 2007). Culturally Appropriate Practice Analysing the impacts of the Sixties Scoop is essential to changing the social realities for Aboriginal peoples today. Practicing from an anti-oppressive philosophy, our mandate includes identifying stereotyping and over generalizing. Misperceiving traditional practices can have a negative effect on the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal working relationship.

To counteract the colonial mentality of our Anglo-Canadian society, social workers must become knowledgeable about Aboriginal perspectives and how they are reflected in traditional and urban Aboriginal culture. Past personal and generational experiences are important as well as present events that will affect future generations (Hart, 2007). Social workers who work with Aboriginal clients must respect and appreciate their worldview. Openness and sensitivity to nuances related to culture, education, and ways of communicating are essential skills. Individuals must be self aware and alert

to the possibility that the social workers' own life experiences will affect the way they view this population (Levin and Herbert, 2004).

Positive cultural attributes such as intergenerational strength of spirit and collective resilience are qualities to celebrate and build upon when social workers partner in the journey toward Aboriginal healing and community renewal. The cultural view of the collective is a core Aboriginal belief that affects social work practice. First Nations culture and communities place an honourable emphasis on kin and its strengths and meaning. Immediate family often includes extended family members and distant relatives. The community is seen as another extension of the family and needs to be included in any healing process. It is crucial to be aware of this collective belief and its manifestations within the community as it affects the language, the terminology and the focus used by the social worker with the client and their relatives when discussing issues and communicating about programs and options. Trust issues may be a concern when working with First Nations peoples. Research findings by Levin and Herbert (2004) identified fear and a lack of trust in healthcare settings due to discrimination and stigmatizing actions. They also reported that Aboriginal women, in particular, lacked trust in health care workers, be it doctors or social workers, due to the inexperience of workers, lack of communication with patients, cultural insensitivity, and absence of knowledge or understanding of Native healing practices (Levin and Herbert, 2004).

Often service providers have inadequate information about the experiences of living in poverty or the needs, perspectives, cultures and traditions of First

Nations clients. Mistrust has grown out of lived experiences such as the Sixties Scoop. Lack of understanding of this influencing factor creates substantial barriers to the establishment of a trust-based relationship between service providers and clients. This lack of trust has implications when trying to develop or implement community based initiatives as trust is vital to its success (Levin and Herbert, 2004). Legacy Lessons The destructive effects of the Sixties Scoop have important lessons for social workers today.

Past mistakes in terms of the cultural context of First Nations children in care must not be repeated. Social workers uphold the fundamental child welfare principle that children should not be removed from their families solely on the basis of poverty. However, this core principle has not been equitably applied in provincial child welfare practices towards First Nations parents and children. The overrepresentation of First Nations children in care continues to be placed in nonAboriginal families (MacDonald and MacDonald, 2007). Caucasian families without cultural supports for Aboriginal children in their care may be unaware of how to address issues such as racism, prejudice and loss.

As noted by Sinclair (2007) "...several studies found that a positive parental attitude towards the child's ethnic group, as well as some form of social involvement with that ethnic group in the family's life is significantly correlated with a child's positive adjustment and positive sense of identity" (p. 70). While pride in the child's Aboriginal heritage can be encouraged when specific cultural involvement plans are in place, many agencies and communities do not have the personnel to share these traditions and values.

In some regions, cultural identity considerations have led to the development of policies that prioritize placement with extended family members or with foster care providers within the same community when children are removed from their parental home (McKenzie and Morrissette, 2003).

The ongoing development of culturally appropriate child welfare services needs to include provisions for personal involvement with Aboriginal heritage languages, cultural traditions and values if apprehended children are to avoid the alienation and identity loss experienced by Aboriginal children from the Sixties Scoop. Professional Training It is clear that the social work profession and the Schools of Social Work have not been 'neutral' in the education and training that produced past social workers (MacDonald and MacDonald, 2007). Social workers' Euro-centric assumptions sanctioned the destructive role of child welfare agencies in relationship to Aboriginal culture. The government's assimilation goals Critical Social Work, 2010 Vol. 11, No. 1 59 Alston-O'Connor for First Nations peoples were congruent with the professional criteria for "the best interests of the child" during the Sixties Scoop.

MacDonald and MacDonald (2007) note that social work education programs today play a key role within the colonizing mentality of child welfare agencies. "Through a social justice lens, the Schools of Social Work need to examine their role in the colonial processes that continue to impact on First Nations people in this country" (MacDonald and MacDonald, 2007, p 43). Social workers can be pro-active in calling for changes in their professional faculties. It is important to consider the method in which social work students are receiving their education. Tensions and stereotypes must be

discussed openly. While the Sixties Scoop may be a potential factor in many of our clients' lives, it is also one in many of our social work students' lives. There is a need for supports to reflect on the needs of all Aboriginal students including those who know their culture, and those who are new to their culture, as well as those who practice tradition and those who were raised within the church" (Clark, Drolet, Arnouse, Walton, Rene' Tamburro, & Mathews, 2009, p. 305). Culturally relevant education, training and curriculum development are critical to help inform empowering approaches. The inclusion of Elders in the field education programs, incorporation of spirituality and ceremony into all classrooms and an emphasis on Aboriginal leaders facilitating these practices can provide deeper insight into the Aboriginal culture and its rich history. In addition to First Nations child welfare agencies and National First Nations organizations, the schools of Social Work need to play an active role in the development of culturally appropriate social work education (MacDonald and MacDonald, 2007).

They need to ensure that Aboriginal faculty teach decolonizing practices to all social work students. Recommendations on how to make the curriculum and the Schools of Social Work more reflective of and relevant to First Nations students' needs must be implemented. As well, social worker associations need to advocate for future social work graduates to be equipped to partner with the Aboriginal community in their work toward social justice. During the Sixties Scoop, the basic principles of intrinsic human value and the right to self-determination were erased by a government intent on cultural genocide. By forcibly reassigning First Nations children to non-Aboriginal families, kinship affiliations were obliterated.

Its multi-generational legacy of grief and loss in relation to family, identity, culture, heritage and community profoundly is still being felt today. As agents of child apprehension, social workers must examine their role in this tragedy and in the colonization of Aboriginal peoples. A commitment to implementing culturally relevant social work practice with First Nations clients is essential for the profession. We have the opportunity to critically evaluate current issues and to partner with members of the Aboriginal community in identifying best practices to challenge the myriad of social, political and personal issues that resulted from the Sixties Scoop.

As progressive agents for social justice, it is one of our responsibilities to create changes to ensure that Aboriginal peoples and their communities have the appropriate resources to flourish and grow.

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