September 26, 2017 National Webinar

Aboriginal Community Social Work: Committing to Anti-Oppressive Practice
ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORK: COMMITTING TO ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

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PURPOSE & NEED

- For social work students and practitioners interested in Aboriginal community practice
- For social workers currently practicing in Aboriginal communities
- To fill gaps in social work education
- Survey results from BSW students indicate the need for more education in the areas of:
  - Aboriginal people and history
  - Knowledge and skill development for future practice
  - Social work theories and perspectives
  - Exploration of social issues experienced in Aboriginal communities today
  - Building competence and confidence
HISTORY OF CANADA’S ABORIGINAL PEOPLES
SOCIAL WORK’S PLACE IN HISTORY
&
ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES TODAY
Canada’s first people were hunters and gatherers who lived in self-governed cultural and familial groups.

They consisted of the Northwest Coastal People, the Plateau People, the Plains People, the Eastern Woodland Hunters, the Eastern Woodland Farmers, the Subarctic People, the Inuit, and covered all areas of Canada.

They lived with little illnesses, without destroying the land or creating pollution, and took great care of the land we now call ‘home.’

European contact and occupancy began in the 1600’s when the trading of fur and goods was established.

Soon after, conflict, wars, and disease began to destroy the First People. Many were killed and some cultural groups were completely lost.

Pre-confederation treaties began in 1701. They were created to promise peaceful relations but despite good intentions, conflict continued.

The Beothuk of Newfoundland were annihilated by 1829 when the last survivor, Shanawdithit died of tuberculosis.

We know the First People today as the Metis, Inuit, First Nations and those of mixed ancestry who are comprised of many cultural groups.
“INDIAN” RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL CANADA’S ATTEMPT AT GENOCIDE

- Newcomers to Canada deemed Aboriginal people “uncivilized” and in need of ‘fixing.’
- Believing they were acting with good intention, the Canadian government developed a plan to eliminate all Aboriginal cultures. They supported and funded the creation of Indian Residential Schools where children would be placed to purify them of their Indigenous ways, and “Christianize” them.
- For over 100 years, beginning in the 1870’s, Aboriginal children were removed from homes and communities by government officials, including police and social workers.
- Parents were threatened with incarceration if they did not give up their children willingly.
- Children were beaten for speaking to siblings, speaking their language, showing emotion and asking for their parents.
- Some children died at school and were buried in unmarked graves while their parents were never notified. Parents found out when their children never returned home.
Written by an Aboriginal child in Residential School…

“To our Dear Parents,

We are going to tell you how we are treated. I am always hungry. We only get two slices of bread and one plate of porridge. Seven children ran away because they are hungry… I am not sick. I hope you are same too. I am going to hit the teacher if she is cruel to me again. We are treated like pigs. Some of the boys always eat cats and wheat. I never ask anyone to give me anything to eat. Some of the boys cried because they are hungry. Once I cry too because I was very hungry.”

Edward B.
Onion Lake Residential School, 1923

• Food Historian Ian Mosby revealed that in the 1940’s and 50’s, over 1300 Aboriginal children were used as test subjects to examine malnutrition and the effectiveness of taking vitamin supplements. This involved allowing them to become ill by withholding food and medical care in residential schools, then giving vitamins to compare results.

• Children suffered loss of culture, language, identity, familial attachments, and were subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

• Children were denied love and affection, and Aboriginal parents were denied the right to raise their own children.

• The last school closed in 1996.
The round-up and shipment of children to residential schools.
“Cattle Truck Children” Kamloops, BC, Indian Residential School (Operation from 1893-1977)
SOCIAL WORK’S “SCAR” ON HISTORY

Social workers were involved in the apprehension and transporting of children to residential school.

Many practitioners today are met with community members’ fear, distrust, anger, and hurt. This continues to influence the ability to form relationships of trust with families, especially when some social workers represent ‘the government’ and are tasked with the duty to remove children from unsafe situations.
SOCIAL ISSUES IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES TODAY

- Alcohol and drug addiction
- FASD
- Family violence
- Lack of familial attachments
- Elder/child abuse and neglect
- Suicide and self harm
- Loss of culture and identity
- Poverty and food insecurity
- Gambling addiction
- Mental health issues
- Lack of resources
- Painful memories and multi-generational trauma associated with the residential school experience
- Continued intentional and unintentional racism, oppression, and assimilation
A study sponsored by the Native Women’s Association of the Northwest Territories found that eight out of ten girls under eight years of age were victims of sexual abuse, and five out of ten boys were also sexually abused in Aboriginal communities. Scholars trace the high rate of abuse to the legacy left behind of residential schools.

If grandparents and parents were raised in residential school exposing them to authoritative violence, lack of human attachment and repeated abuse, what have they learned about parenting future generations?

David Rattray, Aboriginal Educator and Counsellor in BC, says it will take us approximately 9 generations to help Indigenous families heal from trauma related to the residential school experience.
On Wednesday June 11, 2008 at 3:00 p.m. (Eastern Daylight Time), the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, made a Statement of Apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools, on behalf of the Government of Canada.

It can be read at:

www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca

Aboriginal Criteria for Making Restitution & Apology

“Restitution is purification. It is a ritual of disclosure and confession in which there is acknowledgment and acceptance of one’s harmful actions and a genuine demonstration of sorrow and regret, constituted in reality by putting forward a promise to never again do harm and by redirecting one’s actions to benefit the one who has been wronged.”

-Taiaiake Alfred, Wasase
DEVELOPING TRUST IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES
WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCY? CAN WE EVER BE ‘TRULY’ COMPETENT?

- What does cultural competence mean to you?
- Claiming to be knowledgeable in a culture other than our own enables unintentional oppression.
- True cultural competence is practicing
  * Respectfully
  * As an ally
  * As a learner
RESPECT

• Learning as you go
• Asking questions / asking permission
• Being open about who you are personally and professionally
• Getting to know elders and community leaders
• Standing up against racism and oppression
• Attending community activities and events
• Being friendly
• Accepting what is offered (tokens of appreciation, food, participation in events)
KEEPING ‘OPENNESS’ IN THE TOOLKIT

- Introduce yourself to community leaders and organizations (band office, health center, school, store, colleagues).
- What is your role in the community? What are your intentions?
- How long will you be there?
- Honesty with clients is very important.
  Why did you choose social work as a career?
  Who are you and where are you from?
  Why are you involved with the family?
  How will you help the family?
  What will happen if a child is at risk?
- Allow extended family to be involved if requested.
- Responding respectfully when approached in public about work. (Also a common interview question).
DEBUNKING THE HOMOGENEITY MYTH

• NOT ALL ABORIGINAL CULTURES ARE THE SAME!
• Languages, stories, beliefs, healing practices and traditional ceremonies vary across Canada, even those close in geographical proximity, e.g. the Innu and the Inuit of Labrador.
• Your clients may NOT know what the medicine wheel is, what smudging is, or anything about sweat lodge ceremonies.
• Social work education and text books typically include a chapter or two on “Aboriginal Theory and Approaches.” Incorporate into practice with caution.
• **ASK** clients about the cultural beliefs they would like incorporated into their work with you.
• **Do not assume** Aboriginal clients self-identify as Aboriginal. Some have no knowledge of their culture of origin, and some have rejected an Indigenous identity.
“I AM A LEARNER”

• Ask instead of guessing.
• Find and develop a trusting relationship with an elder or leader.
• Community elders and leaders expect to be consulted with.
  *What are community standards? (Specifically important for child protection work)
  *What religious or spiritual beliefs are important to the community?
  *How does the community organize funerals and grieve death?
  *What do they expect from you and the agency you represent?
  *What are the cultural norms? (e.g. use of humor/teasing, entering a home without knocking, accepting tea, avoiding eye contact, seasonal activities, etc.)
COMMUNITY LEADERS AND ELDERS ARE EXPERTS

A common understanding across all Aboriginal cultures.

Social workers are not the expert.

You may:
Consult
Advise
Advocate
Assist

Perform authoritative duties respectfully and with openness.
"I AM AN ALLY"

- Spending time with clients to develop trust: home visits, office visits, and community events
- Attending community gatherings and exhibiting a willingness to learn and socialize together
- Rejecting racism at all levels
- Seeing beyond individual and community issues to the roots of pain such as: victims of abuse, painful memories of residential school, loss of culture, experiences of trauma, loss of attachments, mental health issues, intergenerational addictions, unhealthy coping choices, loss of loved ones to suicide
- Advocate
  * for resources and culturally appropriate services
  * for communities, families, individuals, and children
  * against systems, policies and procedures that oppress (government agencies, the education system, the justice/court system)

“The collection of small actions are the stepping stones toward positive changes.”
“Respectful Involvement in the Community” – Attending community meetings, activities, and cultural events as a learner, volunteering to help, participating when asked, taking a non-expert approach, and accepting what is offered (gifts, knowledge, ceremonies).

“Cultural Appropriation” – the adoption of cultural elements taken from minority cultures by members of the dominant culture, and then using these elements outside of their original cultural context. This cultural property may be forms of dress or personal adornment, music, art, religion, language, knowledge, social behavior, and is used outside of its culture of origin and traditional context.

Examples: dressing as an Aboriginal person for Halloween, tribal tattoos with no knowledge or appreciation of meaning or origin, or participating in smudging without invitation or prior learning.

Misuse of sacred ceremonies and consumerism or exploitation of Aboriginal traditions are dangerous, oppressive, and disrespectful.
ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
“THE ABORIGINAL APPROACH”

• A true and anti-oppressive Aboriginal approach to social work practice is one that reflects the community’s beliefs, values, needs, and wishes – as determined by them.

• What “works” for one Aboriginal community or family may not work for another.

• Respectful and anti-oppressive practice starts by simply asking,

  “Can you help me learn about your culture and traditional beliefs?”

  “How would you like to incorporate your cultural practices and beliefs into our work together?”

  And: “Let’s agree to be open and honest with one another at all times. If you’d like to do things differently or something doesn’t feel right to you, let’s talk about it.”
RESEARCH & COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

- Considerations for anti-oppressive research initiatives in Aboriginal communities:
  - Community-led
  - Community-owned
  - The purpose and findings benefit the community
  - The community may request traditional use of information-gathering (story telling, or a qualitative design)
  - Elders and leaders should be involved from beginning to end
  - Confidential information and results are stored how the community wishes
RESPECTING COMMUNITY NORMS & STANDARDS

• What is typical in one community may not be typical in another – reflecting cultural norms
• Get to know the people and their way of life
• Some examples include:
  • Children being cared for by other family members for extended periods of time
  • “The community raises the child”
  • Children playing outside at 3am (24-hour sunshine)
  • Custom Adoption
  • Funeral procedures and communal periods of grieving (stores/services closed)
  • Parents withholding children from school to go out on the land
INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK & OUR ROLE IN ADVOCACY

• The agencies and governments we represent are Eurocentric (policies, procedures, demand for evidence-based practice, reflect power-imbalanced relationships, and are authoritative). We uncover injustices and promote change that reflects community well-being.

• In child protection work, community values may not reflect government policies. We are often the liaison between the community and our agency, advocating for change to provide better services to families and children.
  
  • Ask communities and families: “What can we do together to keep children safe?, to keep children in their communities?, and maintain attachments to families of origin?”

• School systems are based on westernized curriculum and tend to reject traditional knowledge or lack incorporation of cultural knowledge. The school year also does not reflect seasonal activities. We support communities in educating their children traditionally.

• Canadian health care reflects mainstream methodology—there is a general dismissal of traditional knowledge, medicine, decision making, and healing practices. We advocate for cultural inclusion in health care.
WORKING IN URBAN CENTERS WITH ABORIGINAL CLIENTS

• Caught between two worlds
• Disconnected from the land, family, traditional ways, surrounded and absorbed by Eurocentric culture
• Faces racism at all levels
• May not self-identify as Aboriginal
• May need help accessing resources – friendship centers, health care, government services, social support
• May need assistance in maintaining ties to community or culture of origin
• Importance of asking instead of guessing and rejecting assumptions
SUMMARY

• Aboriginal people still relive pain and trauma associated with residential school and loss of culture through colonization

• Social work and government workers were involved in early assimilation and eradication of Aboriginal cultures – relationships of trust remain difficult to establish today

• Elders and Community Leaders are experts
  Find and get to know someone you are comfortable consulting with

• Not all Aboriginal cultures are the same
  Some values and beliefs are similar across all cultures

• Respectful participation in cultural activities without appropriation is important

• Take time to build relationships of trust and become informed about community norms and standards

• We will remain committed to being:
  • Learners
  • Allies
  • Advocates
  • Open about who we are, and our role in the community

Professional practice is an ongoing learning experience.
CLOSING THOUGHTS
Thank you for attending
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Questions?