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A Critical Reflection: Exposing Whiteness in Child Welfare Practice

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Article abstract

This critical reflection is based on my practice encounter as a white settler social worker within the context of Child Welfare, in rural Canada during the late 1990s. This paper is in line with Karen Healy's (2001) notion of critical social work, as a means to enhance systemic and related child welfare social worker practice. More specifically this paper addresses, through a specific case encounter with an Indigenous mother, how white settler social workers are systemically entangled in perpetuating acts of oppression. This critical reflection enables the reader to become aware of how mainstream social work practice, has the ability to unintentionally harm those service receivers that it actually intends to help. This paper critically addresses discourse around professional innocence, the risks of professional knowledge, representational violence and ethical practice dilemmas, within the context of a disguised practice encounter. The relevance of this critical reflection may be seen as a social justice initiative, catered predominantly towards white settler front line practitioners. These challenges are originating from within our own practices. Our practices are historically embedded in systemic colonial forms of discrimination and racism against First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. I bring light to how white settler social workers should confront their own personal and professional pre-conceived notions, biases, and misconceptions and instead, implement anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices within their work. This process begins with critical self-reflection.

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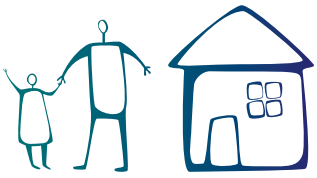

An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples

A Critical Reflection: Exposing Whiteness in Child Welfare Practice

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Abstract

This critical reflection is based on my practice encounter as a white settler social worker within the context of Child Welfare, in rural Canada during the late 1990s. This paper is in line with Karen Healy's (2001) notion of critical social work, as a means to enhance systemic and related child welfare social worker practice. More specifically this paper addresses, through a specific case encounter with an Indigenous mother, how white settler social workers are systemically entangled in perpetuating acts of oppression. This critical reflection enables the reader to become aware of how mainstream social work practice, has the ability to unintentionally harm those service receivers that it actually intends to help. This paper critically addresses discourse around professional innocence, the risks of professional knowledge, representational violence and ethical practice dilemmas, within the context of a disguised practice encounter. The relevance of this critical reflection may be seen as a social justice initiative, catered predominantly towards white settler front line practitioners. These challenges are originating from within our own practices. Our practices are historically embedded in systemic colonial forms of discrimination and racism against First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. I bring light to how white settler social workers should confront their own personal and professional pre-conceived notions, biases, and misconceptions and instead, implement anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices within their work. This process begins with critical self-reflection.

Keywords: social work, Canada, white settlers, social justice, professional development, systemic racism

Introduction

Over the last two half decades I have been involved in front-line social work clinical practice and advocacy, in both mental health and child welfare. However, while working as a provincial child protection worker in rural Canada the period during the late 1990s continues to haunt me. This paper critically reflects on my professional practice as a white settler social worker, attached to a

colonial system (Child Welfare) within the context of Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan. This reflection elucidates my multiple ethical dilemmas embedded in dominant colonial child welfare discourse. This reflection is propelled through a "white saviour complex" mentality tied into a professional role, attached to a system embedded in colonial oppression (Hughey, 2014; Jefferess, 2021). Therefore, relevance is around social justice initiatives, in unlearning dominant knowledge, and creating awareness on how privileged professional values of helping can unintentionally translate into the perpetuation of harm. Further relevance is seen in the recent horrific discovery of unmarked graves of children at the sites of former residential schools in Canada. It should be noted that white settler social workers were indirectly orchestrating this genocide (Caldwell, 1967), and therefore, this paper calls for professional accountability and complicity in continued systemic oppression through professionalism.

In this paper I apply specific aspects of a narrative and pertinent encounter during the late 1990s while employed with a provincial child welfare agency in Saskatchewan, Canada. I have not identified details to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. I want to note that I have used a combination of other similar encounters that have been intermingled in this work to make this encounter "new." Through Karen Healy's (2001), definition of critical social work, I have adapted its use in this paper. Healy (2001) asserts, "the adoption of a self-reflexive and critical stance to the often contradictory effects of social work practice and social policies" (p.2). From her approach, critical social work is a connective form of methodology to dissect this relevant and complex front-line practice encounter.

It is ultimately my intention that through critically reflecting on this encounter, the reader may become aware of how mainstream social work practice has the ability to ironically harm those service receivers that it intends to help (Rossiter, 2001). The type of critical reflection applied is also based on Stein's (2000) definition that provokes that when practitioners are unpacking their historical context and are able to culturally locate their preconceived notions or assumptions, they are then able to assess their meanings and validity, as well construct new and authentic worldviews. The relevance of this paper may be reflected in the evolving need to reinvent critical social work in that challenges are also originating from "within the canon" (Healy, 2001) amongst our own practices, our own policies and possibly even our own educators. This reflection therefore aims to place a critical gaze upon the professional role, the social worker's location, and how child welfare with Indigenous populations have and continue to be systemically constructed (Chapman & Withers, 2019). The paper unpacks discourse of professional innocence, the risks of professional knowledge, representational violence and so-called ethical forms of practice, within the context of a disguised practice encounter.

Front-Line Practice Encounter

As a twenty-five year old white settler child protection worker in rural Saskatchewan in the late 1990s, I carried a significant caseload consisting of predominantly Indigenous families; it should be noted that there is a recorded over-representation of Indigenous children in the Canadian Child

Welfare system connected to embedded colonial forms of knowledge (Trocmé et al., 2004). The specific case details in this paper includes a twenty four year-old single Indigenous mother who had extensive and ongoing child protection involvement; mostly related to child neglect linked to substance abuse. In the past, this young mother has also been placed in numerous foster care homes throughout her own childhood. She had a running record involving inter-generational trauma (her biological care-givers being part of the Residential Schooling System), addictions, an eating disorder and several suicide attempts. She had two of her three children removed from her care and placed in the foster care system.

I vividly recall with extreme discomfort my initial social exchange on visiting this woman. I sensed her distrust, her fear and her helplessness, and in turn I experienced an underlying sense of violating her boundaries. In this exchange, I intuited that I could not help due to my role, regardless of intentions. This insinuation was rather complicit in removing her voice. The following is a brief excerpt from our exchange:

> Woman: "How can I trust you, you come here acting all nice, but you are the devil."
>
> Myself: "I cannot imagine how it is for you to have strangers coming in and out of your life, judging how you parent and not understanding your ways of doing things."
>
> Woman: "Don't try to make out that this relationship is voluntary!"

Absence of Innocence

In this practice encounter, the woman clearly explains how she does not like to be hoodwinked by professionals and appreciates authenticity and trust in relationships. The implication may have been her desire for acknowledgement of the imbalance of power embedded within our dynamic; my whiteness had the structural power to take yet another child out of her care. In contrast, I performed an innocence of how dominant "the good helper role" is in social work practice and I did not realize how it was impacting this woman. Cindy Blackstock (2009) views this professional performance as an "occasional evil… (albeit unintentionally and masked by) pious motivation" to uplift the needy (p. 28). The moment I engaged with this woman as a social worker attached to a system that is linked to deep personal trauma (enacted by having her own children taken into care), and through the historical trauma of social workers being amongst the strongest supporters of the residential schools. The moment I highlighted my power and her lack thereof. I concede that there is truly no innocent space within this practice relationship (Rossiter, 2001), and I cannot conceal my complicity in re-enacting colonial ways of being that for example includes routine risk assessments and the use of running-records. These methods are deeply embedded in a system that facilitates the removal of indigenous children from their families (Donovan, 2016).

The innocence of perceiving myself as the rescuer of the oppressed, so to speak, was also seen in my charitable offers of food stamps, free clothing, and furniture… These small items possibly

took on greater meaning for myself in that I felt absolved of my role in her pain. The exposure and acknowledgment of how the performance of white settler social work can lend itself to dubious and double edged professional practice needs to be revealed; it can at the very least reduce harm, although it can never remove the risk (Rossiter, 2001).

Representational Violence

In fact, practising as a critical social worker has "burst my bubble" as I have had to rethink of viewing myself as a good helper which is at the very least emotionally unsettling (Macias, 2013). It is no wonder that this woman at risk of losing another child stated, "…but you are really the devil." She is possibly referring to what my whiteness with its attached colonial practice represents in its totality. In contrast, I am inversely referring to her in a totalizing way. The pathologized and so-called casefile running-records re-iterate labels of "mental health" and "substance abuse." Donovan (2016) views this process as representation where together we are both mutually producing the other, while creating the self.

Further this retelling of her story may in fact be enhancing her oppression. Paradoxically, a critical social worker may view the retelling of a story as a form of representational violence. For example, the moment I perform the so-called expert role by sharing another's story, for professionals to use as a study moment, is a subtle violation of sorts (Donovan, 2016). This paper is in fact an example of my retelling this encounter through my newfound suspicious eyes, one that informs a new story, outside of what I have always considered to be good social work.

Although there is this ethical dilemma around retelling this practice encounter, simultaneously it can also open a space towards greater awareness linked to justice and dignity of our service receivers (Donovan, 2016). Ethical conflicts are around the social location of whose voice is being heard, along with who is constructing the narrative being told. I acknowledge that as a white settler social worker, ownership to this story does not belong to my privilege. In other words who "owns life stories and who has access to another's story are crucial questions in struggles for the sovereignty and integrity of indigenous peoples around the world" (Haraway, 2019, p. 568). However, as a critical social worker, through deliberate and conscious attempts such as writing this paper, I am retelling this encounter whilst dwelling on the consequences of representing the other.

Risks of Professional Knowledge: Being in an "Uncertain Space"

There is inherent tension in knowing that as white settler social workers we are not immune from harming those we aim to help, yet we continue to practice with these repercussions so we can work toward social justice (Healy, 2001; Rossiter, 2011). The need for critical social work is that we need to reconstruct social work with justice as it's intended end and to accomplish this we need to become aware of "social work's unintended complicity with injustice" (Rossiter, 2011, p. 981).

The side effect of doing critical social work is that since we are separating our notion of what the profession is from mainstream social work, it can leave us confused and uncertain about what social work is outside of professionalism (Rossiter, 2011). The challenge is that dominant social work is "guided more by social works professional interest – to give social workers and social work education programs status in society – than by the interests and needs of local communities to whom we are, in theory anyway meant to be responsive and accountable" (Gray et al., 2007, p.5 6). In hindsight, even the initial identification of needs regarding this woman was grounded in forms knowledge that do not truly make room for authentic healing and simply reinforce her oppression. In this vein, mainstream social work has tended to be focused on risk behaviours, problems and deficits, whereas in essence Indigenous forms of knowledge speak to strength based approaches, a completely different point of departure (Bryant et al., 2021). For example, I recall this woman having a close relationship with an Elder in her community, and in the early stages he would take a more front-line role regularly calling and meeting with my child protection supervisor. He wanted to work collaboratively in supporting this family. However, my supervisor at the time was white heterosexual man raised in rural Canada and from my perspective, he seemed to have no real interest in accessing what could have been a strength based approach in healing; using the community as a support. As a result ethical dilemmas ensued while continuing to apply deficit based professional knowledge with all its theories at the forefront, and yet my sense of ethics (attached to strength based approaches) in the background.

However an "unsettled" space has allowed me to reframe the profession as a practice of ethics where I am committed to revealing the conflicts that are a part of mainstream social work knowledge (Rossiter, 2011). Further ethical dilemmas ensued when conducting standard risk assessments. Risk assessments are a tool of violence. In this case, they were used to ultimately provide enough evidence in the case of this woman, to remove her child. In fact, the use of mainstream standardized risk assessment tools in making child welfare decisions regarding Indigenous families has been seen as an inaccurate gauge of actual risk. It does not take into account enough socio-cultural aspects, such as the role of extended family, the surrounding traditional community (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020), or disregards strength based protective factors (Logan-Greene & Jones, 2017).

Also critical practice means exposing tensions that come from our history of professional knowledge, and using ethics to guide practice; rather than exclusively using professional theories in a vacuum (Rossiter, 2011). This vacuum, so to speak, may serve to overly focus assessments on the caregiver role in isolation. Ethics in this sense would be a vehicle or tool that allows one to consciously and deliberately re-evaluate mainstream professional knowledge. Thereby, it would deeply challenge perceptions of what social work *is* or what social work *is not*. For example, if I had not colluded with normative social work practice and constructed the story of the woman as a "substance abuser with mental health issues," I may have opened a space for a completely different story to emerge. A re-told story of "a woman with an attachment to her child and a woman who has courage, perseverance, and commitment to change, while being supported by her extended family and Elders in her community."

Furthermore, Rossiter (2011) argues that mainstream social work attempts to make sense of individuals by placing them into large categories which remove any uniqueness or authenticity. For example, the violent capture of this woman is carried out by labelling her as a perpetrator in a vacuum. As reminded by Rossiter (2011), "persons exceed their representations" (p. 83), and the profession should not assume to know the experience of the other. As such, this notion of acknowledging diversity in and of itself may ironically draw attention to categories of difference (and in turn sameness) which make oppressive claims to "know" the other (Perpich, 2008, p. 188).

Ethics in Critical Practice

This oppression was not only enacted through face-to-face encounters, but in fact it was enacted through ongoing record keeping (De Montigny, 1995). The running-records, through using traditional client centered practice, placed the critical gaze on every word, every action, and every reaction which served to perpetuate the so-called "expert identity," and in turn further dilute the client's sense of self. I recall writing court related affidavits with the authority to construct what was considered strong motivation to support the removal of her child into care. These running commentaries around "smelling of beer" or "looking dazed" were interpreted as substance abuse issues; whereas in fact it is likely other meanings could involve understandable expressions of trauma, or they could be reinterpreted as unsituated snapshots in time, not based on overall, ongoing, or contextual lived experience. I recall multiple supervision sessions to reassess supposed facts. However, these accounts were all steeped in my *whiteness* which were further verified based on my supervisors *whiteness*. Together, the colonial agency that employed us gave its stamp of approval (De Montigny, 2005).

This leads me back to the importance of ethics in critical social work practice, rather than so-called "professional knowledge in a vacuum" (Rossiter, 2011). As Rossiter (2011) believes, ethics should not originate from ourselves, but rather ethics should "come from outside the self" even originating from our service receivers (p. 985). This view that ethics which originate from the other, should guide our practice is clearly a departure from mainstream social work. Mainstream social work can possibly view ethics as originating through the social worker alone. Whereby reflecting only on the practitioner's preconceived biases, historical contexts, and cultural norms in a vacuum (Rossiter, 2011). This lens does not open spaces to expose how systemic oppressions impact social positioning. Thus, ethics originating from knowledge outside of whiteness, reveals the harm that a worker may actually cause as a result of her position of privilege or power (Healy, 2000).

In contrast, ethics originating from outside professionalism may be guided by "authentic knowledge along with principles of love, humility, truth, honesty, respect, bravery and wisdom" (Absolon, 2016, p. 54). In turn, it opens a space for greater "truth of sharing, truth of accounts, truth of accountability and truth of presence" (Absolon, 2016, p. 53). This authentic presence is an essential ingredient in critical practice; most especially by those practitioners who hold immense privilege due to their whiteness. White social workers applying these "wholistic" ethics that Absolon (2016) proposes, have the potential to evoke a culture of responsibility and accountability in critical practice.

Embrace Innocence: A Self Righteous and Guilt Free Act?

The traditional skill of self reflection has received criticism, in that ironically we reveal our dirty laundry, and expose our violations, because underlying it is a way to appease anxieties, so as to restore ourselves guilt free, without truly unsettling oppressive practice (Margolin,1997a;1997b). In fact, I question whether through this critical analysis I am guilty of patting myself on the back to cure my white fragility. In its essence, reaffirms the oppression of the other. From a place of my white settler privilege, I believed that through my proclamations of understanding the others fear and pain I was performing good social work. I have at times experienced defensive anger at being asked to address my colonial privilege where it leaves me unsettled and disengaged performance of responsibility ensues. However, in reality, nothing may change accept that once again an absolution of sorts occurs at performing a "self-critique" (Boler, 1999).

Lip Service: A Response towards Systemic Inequity?

Although this traditional practise of self reflection places the gaze on the social worker, it does not address how our service receivers, specifically those that are marginalized, are impacted by interplay of structural, material, emotional, cultural and social realities (Boler, 1999). These structural inequities, such as the poverty and inadequate housing situation for this particular woman, were factors in her inability to cope. In turn, it opened the door for her heightened visibility in child protection involvement. For example, numerous intakes were received around the children "looking hungry" or "not bathing enough." However, these were possibly centered on structural challenges that became entangled with "protection" challenges. This lack of material support may be seen in the overrepresentation of First Nation children in care or on protection caseloads, disproportionate funding allocated to First Nation families regarding preventative supports, as well as (such as in my practice encounter) more aggressive intervention by child welfare targeted at these families (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). The latter stresses the importance of using a critical social work approach in addressing the material realities surrounding those marginalized others amongst our service receivers.

Moreover, critical practice does not allow us to continue to reaffirm the false notion of professional benevolence and morality (Badwell, 2016). The profession cannot continue to place the racist card under the table and continue to avoid our complicity with oppression by simply directing us to just keep on being client centered and empathetic, rather than addressing violence (Badwell, 2016). This mainstream notion that our profession is a site of justice and social workers are the arms that remove injustices is really a sugar coated one that hides the underlying colonialism that is still a part of professional practice (Badwell, 2016). In other words, these notions of perceived good social work through provocations of empathy, being client centered, and self reflective may in fact be a smokescreen for oppressive practice, and need to be exposed at every turn.

Navigating the Shifting of Power

Critical social work also aspires to reduce the violent impacts of an inequitable system through attempting to balance the power of social workers in relation to their clients (Badwell, 2016). The ethical dilemma I experienced is the process of shifting power to clients may ironically involve a repetition of violence, in that those in power are once again in control of the means of managing this power shift. As a strategy towards social justice, the privileged social worker should co-create a space where power shifts. Therefore, the client can retell their own story in a process that they are in control of too. The idea is that these stories are sites of both critical practice and of resistance which are necessary to challenge the centring of whiteness in social work (Badwell, 2016). In fact, as a white settler social worker, it may be integral to step aside for non-white racialized colleagues to step forward in the authentic interests of the client. This idea of stepping aside could be construed as a small gesture toward social justice. To reduce the clients' risk, it is possible that a social worker from a shared worldview may in fact interpret and assess the situation with less suspicious eyes. Further rationale for stepping aside is that service receivers may be linked to multiple historical and intergenerational experiences and as a result practice encounters, especially with whiteness in the context of child welfare, can be thwart with the reliving of previous trauma.

In this case encounter, it is possible that my whiteness was an emotional trigger of deep rooted violence, attached to my colonial social worker identity; specifically because this woman had family destroyed through the residential school system, as well as her own children removed from her care. Those white settler social workers who are unable to step aside (due to structural and systemic constraints) should be aware that "deep, humble listening creates an opening for information sharing, collaborative knowledge development, and honest communication (as well as being mindful that) social workers need to earn trust and respect with the community, which takes time due to the history and ongoing practices of colonisation" (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 34). Such acknowledgement of humility and mindfulness can be difficult, but it is not only necessary for continued relationship building, but to redress oppressive practice.

Conclusion: An Evolving and Ambiguous Work in Progress

In this paper, I have pointed towards critical social work being a contradictory practice and one that is filled with ambiguity. Boler (1999) explains that practicing critically opens an uncomfortable emotional journey, where we ought to carefully, consciously, deliberately and authentically examine assumed cultural histories, assumptions and values. This examination of our own cultural histories is always a process that is understood in relation to the histories and material situation of our clients. It is an evolving and ongoing process of *becoming* as a result of our encounters with service receivers.

Further, I am in the process of changing; my thoughts are constantly being redefined by re-telling this story and an identity shift emerges that is dependent on my underlying "willingness to change" (Boler, 1999, p. 179). My openness to change involves consciously learning how to step outside of

our privileged spaces that keep a comfortable and safe distance between ourselves and our clients so we can intimately "witness" their truth rather than remain spectators of their trauma (Boler, 1999). Being a spectator makes it easier to construct totalizing value judgements about clients (Boler, 1999). For example, the assessing of client risk in child welfare may aim to capture clients as either good parents, or as bad parents. This feeds the "binary trap of innocence and guilt" (Boler, 1999, p. 13). The ability to blame clients allows white settler social workers to avoid our own discomforts at the lived reality of the other. It perpetuates continued oppression. However, through critical practice rather than fixating on binary traps, allows us to learn to inhabit an ambiguous identity and in turn project this outwards onto our clients (Boler, 1999). It takes courage and awareness to acknowledges our complicity in the harm we may cause under the guise of professionalism. However, recognizing these ethical conflicts can also lead to a greater sense of connection with others, and possibly more meaningful social work practice (Boler, 1999).

This critical lens reveals the structural paradoxes in the foundations of normative social work; for example, when we see poverty amongst our clients rather than offer basic needed material assistance we focus on "poor parenting," or we oppose racism yet our agencies consist of predominantly white social workers (Rossiter, 2005). Rather than question how such contradictions form the very fabric of our discipline one can become deflated and even "apologetic" (Rossiter, 2005). However, through unpacking how front line practice may be constructed around the dominant culture of white settler professionalism, it points towards how our profession can possibly feed an inherent power imbalance. The latter, albeit unintentionally, reinforces oppression for those seeking social work services.

This is not to say that we should use the notion of critical reflection as a type of confessional to absolve our colonial sins then move on with a clean slate. Rather, this type of critical practice allows us the perspective to step outside of our inherent places of privilege, and view the story that is left out of previous versions. Ultimately, critical practice not only resonates more meaningfully with social justice, but it may also imbue ourselves with enough emotional resilience to shift professional practices in accordance with multiple forms of Indigenous knowledge, created through continued questioning.

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