

Cultural Competency - Working With Aboriginal Peoples: A non-Native Perspective

Erin Vinkle
Native Human Services Graduate Student
Laurentian University

Introduction

Throughout the course of my education in the Social Work field, I have come to learn about the importance of cultural competency as it pertains to the helping profession and working with Aboriginal peoples. There are many disheartening issues that First Nations communities face in our country today. I have gained some insight of the rules and regulations that the Federal government has placed upon Aboriginal people. Government legislation has created impossible boundaries that prevent Aboriginal populations the right to exercise equality in Canada. Unfortunately those most affected are the lives of many innocent Native women, children and families who struggle with poverty, violence and racism on a daily basis. Racism towards Aboriginal peoples continues to happen generation after generation. It is necessary within the social work profession to raise awareness about how our society lacks the knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture. If social work practice recognizes the need to be culturally competent when working with Aboriginal peoples then we should examine how our actions will lead us to that goal. The lack of historical knowledge plays a key role in how we systemically continue to oppress the lives of First Nations people. Social workers in Canada should be aware of the challenges Aboriginal people face with regards to government policies and legislation that act as roadblocks preventing First Nations people from improving their quality of life and overall well-being. It should be the responsibility of those who design and implement social work programming within Canadian universities; to see that the quality and delivery of education is inclusive to the specific and cultural needs necessary to accurately assess those whose lives they may affect. Regardless of race or ethnic background, social workers need to understand the socio-economic and cultural complexities of Aboriginal lives. It should be mandatory that social workers obtain a cultural, social and

economic understanding of Cultural Competency and Aboriginal peoples in order to work competently with the issues they face. Throughout this paper I will describe my experience as a non-Native student who enrolled in a Native social work program and how this experience has enhanced my understanding of cultural competency and working with Aboriginal peoples.

Cultural Competency and Aboriginal Peoples

As I entered into the Native Human Services program as a non-Native student I felt a strong need to understand the divide between Aboriginal peoples and Mainstream society. I grew up in northern Manitoba where there are large Aboriginal populations. Racism and discrimination towards Aboriginal people in the Prairie Provinces of Canada are alarmingly high. I was personally motivated to understand why this was happening. I also felt that if I wanted to become a social worker I should be aware of what causes such oppression in our Country. I spent the first two years of my university education within the mainstream, Anglophone social work program. I had initially wanted to enter the Native Human Services social work program but when I called to inquire about it, one of the first questions I was asked (by the voice on the other end of the telephone) was: “are you Native?” I replied: “no” and the voice on the other end of the telephone strongly suggested I enter the mainstream program, and with that I complied. Because I had grown up in northern Manitoba and observed the high rates of racism throughout my life, I can honestly say I was not surprised at what I had been told. I remembered feeling somewhat confused and thought to myself that I would eventually find a way to enrol in the Native Human Services program. I decided fill my electives with as many Native courses as I could. The first Native course I enrolled in was; “The Original People of North America” which discussed issues of oppression that Aboriginal people face in our country. In my second year of university I continued to enrol in other Native classes. I came to realize throughout the course of my education that Aboriginal people were one of the most oppressed groups in Canada and have been for centuries. I began to think that if Aboriginal people have been oppressed for centuries and have survived, then Aboriginal people would have a lot to teach us about oppression and resilience. I learned that a Western perspective was only *one* way to perceive the world and the helping profession. By the

end of my second year in the Mainstream social work program I decided to try and switch programs again.

This time I spoke to the Native Human Services program co-ordinator who told me I could enrol in their program and it was at that time that I successfully changed programs. When I had made an appointment to speak with the Native Human Services coordinator I was somewhat apprehensive about how they would react towards me. I was afraid I might be rejected or not taken seriously because I was non-Native. I was afraid of what they would think of me. I was accepted into the program immediately and was treated with kindness and respect. At this time I did not experience any resistance entering into a Native program as a non-Native student. It was not an issue for the Native Human Services Department. Why had I been told earlier that I had to be a Native person in order to enrol in the Native Human Services program? Why did I experience resistance when I wanted to practice diversity, and why do boundaries within our society always seem to be placed around race and culture? This confused me especially when Canada perceives itself to be a culturally diverse country. What I did not realize at the time is that I had experienced a restrictive act of institutional racism; which is also known as Western control over Aboriginal people, colonization, segregation and marginalization. I was a non-Native person being told not to enrol in the Aboriginal program.....why?

Any health care professional who works with First Nations people should understand why it is important to become educated and informed about the political and economic predicament Aboriginal people find themselves in. It is equally important to understand, throughout history, how Aboriginal people have been affected by social policy due to the oppressive laws that have been imposed upon them. It is necessary to understand Indigenous people from a historical context in order to understand why so much systemic violence and racism exists towards Aboriginal people in Canada. We also need to be aware of the vulnerable position Aboriginal women are in today and where these acts of racism and violence come from. What many social workers do not know is that historically, before colonial contact, Aboriginal women held a lot of political power and prestige among First Nations societies. During the colonial period Western society viewed Aboriginal women as a threat to

colonial economic growth due to the political power First Nations women held among their people. As the fur trade diminished so did the power of First Nations women and the Canadian government gained control over economic growth at the expense of Aboriginal peoples and their pride. This knowledge is significant when discussing cultural competency and social work today because it helps us understand how the impacts of the past have and still affect Aboriginal people in the present. Native women were viewed as such a threat; that it was to the Canadian government's advantage to disgrace Aboriginal women in order to gain hierarchal prestige and power. Sarah Carter (2007) states:

The documentary evidence on women was overwhelmingly produced by European males, who had little appreciation of their roles and ranges of activities. They tended to be surprised at the amount of physical labour that Aboriginal women performed, and often concluded that they were little better than slaves or beasts of burden. At times, however, European observers commented on the amount of power and influence women appeared to exercise-over their husbands, for example. Yet we have to ask: did these observers fail to understand the lives and roles of women, were their views biased by the ideological boundaries of their own concept of proper roles for women (and men), or did their observations to some extent actually reflect the work and status of Aboriginal women? (p.28)

What Carter tells us is that European settlers were much different than Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples of Canada had their own unique governing systems that were much different to that of the European Settler. Indigenous peoples are those who are original Natives to the land. This means they have been on the land since the beginning much before Europeans settlers arrived. European settlers are not Indigenous peoples of North America. Indigenous peoples are also those whose ways of living and seeing the world reflect their Aboriginal culture as well as the land in which they come from. The author suggests that perhaps it was a lack of understanding (on the part of the new colonial settler) that caused the distortion and misconception of Aboriginal societies. Indigenous societies were eventually made to look as though they were incompetent in comparison to the "sophisticated" European ways of living. According

to Barbara Perry, author of “Silent Victims” (2008): “In short, colonial practice and discourse were intended to deprive Native Americans of their status as an independent people and reduce them to just another racialized group” (24). If we, as social workers chose to practice ethical correctness when working with Aboriginal populations, then we must understand the value of becoming educated about history and the oppressive effects it has had on Indigenous people.

Social workers who work with Aboriginal peoples at anytime will find it difficult to practice cultural competency if they do not understand Aboriginal issues from their historical context. Other considerations that indicate the need for historical insight is that Aboriginal people are still suffering today from systemic discrimination that has been imposed upon them from centuries ago. At the basis of these discriminatory views lies the ongoing battle for money and power. Unfortunately it is Aboriginal children, families and communities who suffer tremendously at the brunt of the political tension that continues between First Nations leaders and the Canadian government. If social workers had the opportunity to become educated about the political and socio-economic realities that continue to oppress and marginalize Aboriginal people, they would be better equipped to practice cultural competency when working with Aboriginal children, families and communities. Gray, Coates and Yellowbird (2010) point out:

Not only have the efforts of social workers, and others, been proven to be largely ineffective, the profession has not stood out as being at the forefront of advocacy efforts to expose or combat the rampant poverty, the ‘third world conditions’ and the human rights abuses, nor has it been a major supporter of efforts to uphold land claims and treaty rights. The profession has been largely absent from these political realities and this absence is a direct result of the dominant modern paradigm under which social work has developed, which has more often than not, been ineffective in dealing with the needs of Indigenous Peoples (p.49).

The social work profession should be willing to accept the realities Aboriginal people are faced with everyday. Our education system should be meeting the needs of Aboriginal peoples. Social Work Programming

within Canadian universities should encourage non-Native social workers to practice diversity especially those who will work with Aboriginal peoples. We must also act responsibly and make an effort to educate ourselves in regards to comprehending the complex socio-political and economic relationship that has come to affect so many First Nations people. By understanding history from an Indigenous perspective helps social workers understand Aboriginal people, their culture and how they live today. Cultural competency also means working together to bridge the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Working together within the education system would help non-Native social workers gain insight to the needs of Aboriginal peoples.

When examining issues of violence and racism that exists towards Aboriginal peoples, history once again becomes a very important topic because it helps non-Native social workers understand what First Nations people have been through and at the same time helps them to recognize the many faces of violence. Analyzing historical patterns will help social workers recognize that violence portrays itself in many forms. Violence is found in political, social, historical, economic, emotional, physical, mental and spiritual realms. Violence can also be observed from micro, mezzo and macro perspectives of social work practice which help to connect the effects violence has had on Aboriginal peoples throughout the North America Continent. It is necessary for social workers who choose to work with Aboriginal peoples to have some comprehension of the Indian Act, what it is, and how it was used to oppress Aboriginal people. The government uses the Indian Act to control Aboriginal peoples. Moreover the Indian Act is used to measure the “status” of every Aboriginal person and their rights were determined by this. Long and Dickason (1998) describe the Indian Act as:

The British North American Act of 1867 gave the power of legislation control over Indians and their lands to the federal government. Thus empowered, the Canadian Parliament began drafting provisions for what was to become the Indian Act. The Indian Act was, and perhaps still is, the most oppressive legislation in Canadian history (p.88).

Non-Native social workers who have an understanding about how the Indian Act has affected Aboriginal people are far more culturally competent than those who do not. Building allies and working together to understand the issues Aboriginal people face will help to create positive relationships thus creating cultural competency when working with Indigenous peoples.

The relationship between the federal government and First Nations people is one of the most extraordinary and complex areas of Canadian politics. It is literally impossible to go into depth on any one issue dealing with Aboriginal people because every issue that relates to First Nations people is attached to the historical and complex political discourse that relates back for hundreds of years. This complex relationship between the federal government and Aboriginal people is one of violence and oppression filled with years of forced assimilation. These violent acts of oppression are referred to as “cultural genocide”. Social workers in Canada should be aware of these facts. Being Native or non-Native is irrelevant. Social workers should be educated about the issues that exist between the federal government and First Nations people. The education system would benefit all social workers by recognizing the importance of teaching in-depth theory and history as it relates to First Nations people and the political, socio-economic struggles they face. By doing so, social workers would then have a greater understanding of what it means to be culturally competent. Becoming educated about the negative effects of government legislation and policies has had on Aboriginal peoples can help social workers further identify systemic and institutional oppression. As a non-Native social worker I have learned to be much more aware and sensitive to the issues that Aboriginal peoples face. It is not ethical for social workers to make life changing decisions about the personal lives of Aboriginal people if they are ignorant to the challenges Aboriginal people face. Nash, Munford and O’Donoghue (2005) confirm: ‘To be able to assess you need to know the client’s politics, ethnicity, social status’ (p.148). Discrimination and racism is a form of violence which has become a destructive reality for Aboriginal populations. First Nations people face systemic racism and discrimination which goes unnoticed throughout society. Professionally we should raise our awareness in order to competently assess Aboriginal clients or we risk making ethical

errors due to our lack of knowledge; unknowingly contributing to the subtle but dangerous acts of systemic violence.

Aboriginal women are also at risk for experiencing violence and racism more than non-Native women. This is due to government policies such as the Indian Act that has put Aboriginal women in very vulnerable and frightening circumstances in our country. Any social worker working with Aboriginal women should understand how they are affected socially, economically, politically, emotionally and spiritually (Bopp, Bopp, & Lane, 2006). An Aboriginal woman's political position within society is substantially different from non-Native women. Some of the most oppressive legal policies are directed towards Aboriginal women. Long and Dickason the authors of "Vision of the Heart" (1998) state:

For example, the treaty process required that "official" representatives be elected. This practice eliminated women from local and national politics, while men were legally given more political power than they possessed under traditional politics. Until 1951, the Indian Act denied women the right to vote in band elections, to hold elected office and to participate in public meetings that decided band business (p.89).

It is acts such as these that clearly identify systemic discrimination that exists towards Aboriginal women. Social workers should be made aware of the dangerous position the Canadian government has placed Aboriginal women in. Aboriginal women are also more vulnerable to domestic violence as Long and Dickason (1998) state:

The Indian world is a political world; there is no getting around it. As Karen Ilnik states, "If you don't want to get involved, you really have to work at it". Women of the New Brunswick Tobique Reserve took some radical steps to improve their economic and political situation. They were desperate for housing, many of them finding themselves and their children out on the street with no place to go. Some women had been kicked out of their houses by their husbands. Since the Indian Act have men sole ownership of the family house through a certificate of possession, their wives had no housing rights and not legal recourse (p.95).

It is important that non-Native social workers understand that legal policies have made Aboriginal women very vulnerable giving them less rights than non-Aboriginal women due to the implementation of the Indian Act. This puts Aboriginal women at greater risk for racist and violent acts that are imposed upon them within society. First Nations women continue to be put in many vulnerable and demoralizing circumstances. For example, the Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada Report (2006) states that:

The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women (1993) maintains that Aboriginal women are particularly excluded. This is so, they argue, because one of the legacies of colonization has been a diminution of status of Aboriginal women, both within their own communities and within society at large (p.62).

These injustices also put Aboriginal woman at great risk for their safety in our country. Aboriginal women are vulnerable targets to violent crimes resulting in death. There are approximately five hundred missing Aboriginal women in Canada. These are very disgraceful facts and it sends a dehumanizing message to First Nations populations. According to the Report on “Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence against Aboriginal Women in Canada” (2011), it confirms that:

According to Canadian government statistics, young Indigenous women are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence. The pattern looks like this: Racist and sexist stereotypes deny the dignity and worth of Indigenous women, encouraging some men to feel they can get away with acts of hatred against them. Decades of government legislation have impoverished and broken apart Indigenous families and communities, leaving many Indigenous women and girls extremely vulnerable to exploitation and attack. Many police forces have failed to institute necessary measures – such as training, protocols and accountability mechanisms – to ensure that officers understand and respect the Indigenous communities they serve. Without such measures, police too often fail to do all they can to ensure the safety of Indigenous women and girls whose lives are in danger.

These alarming facts are only some of the many violent acts of discrimination, racism and oppression that Aboriginal women face. This only confirms the need for social workers to become knowledgeable about legislation such as the Indian Act so that they may understand the position Aboriginal people are in, systemically, politically, economically and socially. Social workers should be provided with the training that promotes cultural competency so that they may acquire the skills necessary to work with Aboriginal women on issues of violence and racism. If mainstream social workers are not aware of the legislation and policies that affect the lives of First Nations people; the profession will not be given the opportunity to become culturally competent when dealing with Aboriginal women, families, and communities in Canada. It is unethical to remain unaware of the possibility that we may be making wrong decisions due to a lack of knowledge which could potentially disrupt the lives of many First Nations people. If we are not aware of the political complexities that Aboriginal people are subjected to within our society, then we cannot possibly understand how to improve their quality of life and well-being.

Another important area to consider when discussing cultural competency and working with Aboriginal populations, is to be aware of their unique and spiritually rich culture. Cultural competency can help teach social workers how to see the world from other worldviews which allows more opportunity for the average social worker to “think outside of the box”. Aboriginal peoples provide unique methodologies that can be used to lend social workers the insight into Indigenous spiritual knowledge. Indigenous knowledge consists of removing ones thinking from a linear way of thinking to that of a more holistic approach. For example, the ancient Medicine Wheel has been used by Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years throughout North America. To be more specific Cree Medicine Wheel teachings have been around for centuries and are used to help restore balance in one’s life (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 2000). Moreover, the Cree Medicine Wheel helps to provide guidance within peoples’ lives spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Indigenous knowledge does not separate any area of a person’s life into categories. The Medicine Wheel teaches us that all things are connected and should be viewed holistically as such (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 2000). It would be necessary for non-Native social workers to understand the

spiritually holistic worldview of Aboriginal peoples if they want to work effectively with First Nations peoples and communities. As a non-Native social worker I have found Indigenous methodologies to be very helpful for myself both personally and professionally. It is important for mainstream social workers who work with First Nations peoples to be made of *how* Aboriginal people view the world around them. Aboriginal culture interprets the world from a distinct ideology which can be much different to that of mainstream culture. In order to work towards bridging the gap between Aboriginal worldviews of helping and direct social work practice, mainstream education should be providing social workers with this education. Social workers who have an opportunity to learn about Indigenous healing methodologies would have a better understanding of Aboriginal culture. The mainstream healthcare profession recognizes the need to be culturally competent. By providing the appropriate education for non-Native social workers would help mainstream health care providers gain some insight into Indigenous philosophies. This would allow for Aboriginal populations to identify within mainstream urban health centres.

Indigenous knowledge is very complex. It is profound in that one cannot understand the depth of this knowledge unless they are capable of allowing themselves to encompass *all* of creation and apply it to Indigenous theoretical practice. Aboriginal culture is rich in theory because it originates back thousands of years. This knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation through traditional ceremonies and oral teachings. Aboriginal peoples have been using a holistic approach to healing for centuries because it works. Aboriginal healing uses a philosophy that believes that *all* of nature encompasses a living and breathing spirit and that the human spirit is very much a part of nature. They believe that in order for the spirit to heal, people need to understand how they are connected to nature. Throughout my education within the Native Human Services program I have learned the importance of these principles which has enhanced my skills as a social worker.

As a Non-Native social worker I have also come to understand that Aboriginal culture encompasses a holistic approach that acknowledges the many realities that exist universally. For example, Indigenous thought acknowledges the importance of their ancestors that have passed over

to the spirit world. When working with Aboriginal populations it should be noted that Indigenous knowledge does not separate the physical, spiritual, emotional and mental aspects of life. Spirituality is included in daily life, giving thanks to the creator at all times. The concept of spirituality is extremely important in regards to healing and working with Aboriginal peoples. When non-Native social workers become conscious of this fact they can begin to understand the differences between Western and Indigenous social work methodological practices, thus gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to be culturally competent. This is why therapy is many times non-effective for many First Nations people and misdiagnosis tends to be common. The Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project Report on "A Gathering of Wisdoms" (2002) informs us that: "Most Indian people resist being absorbed into the mainstream American culture. Mainstream mental health services, which are predicated on dominant cultural assumptions, are unacceptable to and ineffective with many Indian people" (p.116). This is an error that mainstream social workers may make when working with Aboriginal people. Indigenous knowledge teaches the non-Native social worker that Aboriginal culture is holistic and spiritual in content and may need to be applied when working with Aboriginal people. If non-Native social workers are not aware of the importance of traditional healing and do not have an understanding of Indigenous practice they will continue to be ineffective when working among many Aboriginal people, families and communities. Cultural competency is a very important component to the success of the therapeutic relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers and clients. Cultural competency not only includes the need to become knowledgeable about the political and socio-economical factors that affect Aboriginal people, but it also requires the need to understand a culture's spiritual and traditional beliefs. These are only a few of the many issues that need to be recognized when working with Aboriginal populations. It is necessary to understand that cultural competency and working with First Nations people includes educating non-Native social workers about the in depth historical discourse that exists between Aboriginal people and the Canadian government. This insight will hopefully allow social workers to appreciate diversity and understand social work from other cultural perspectives.

Conclusion

Social workers should be given the opportunity to be educated about the oppressive issues Aboriginal peoples face in Canada so that they may be prepared to work competently with First Nations populations. Aboriginal people have been exposed to some of the most oppressive acts of systemic violence and racism yet our government continues to ignore and oversee the issues that relate to marginalization and discrimination towards Aboriginal people in Canada and worldwide. As social workers, Native or non-Native, it is important to understand cultural differences between Western and Indigenous societies as well as the historical context in which they are viewed. In order to “bridge the gap” between the systemic divide that exists within our institutions we need to be sensitive to the needs of those who we as a society continue to fail. We must acknowledge that it is the responsibility of all social workers to be diversely educated within the helping profession so that they may confidently practice cultural competency when working with Aboriginal populations.

References

- Aboriginal Women and Violence Report (2006). Canadian Government. Retrieved from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/pdfs/fem-abor_e.pdf
- Bopp, J., Bopp, M., & Lane, P. (2006). *Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada: The Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series*. Second Edition.
- Carter, S. (2007). Aboriginal people and colonizers of western Canada to 1900. In C. Heron (ed), *Themes in Canadian Social History*. (p.117). Toronto. University of Toronto Press.
- Gray, M., Coates, J., & Yellow Bird, M. (2010). *Indigenous Social Work around the World: Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice*. Ashgate. (49)
- Long, D. & Dickason, O.P. (1998). *Visions of the Heart: Canadian Aboriginal Issues*. Thompson Nelson. Scarborough, On.

- Nabigon, H. & Mawhiney, A.M. (2000). Aboriginal theory: a Cree medicine wheel guide for healing first nations. F. J. Turner (Ed.), *Social work treatment: interlocking theoretical approaches*. (5th ed.) New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Nash, M. Munford, R., O'Donoghue, K. (2005). *Social Work Theories in Action*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. (p.148).
- Perry, B. (2008). *Silent Victims: Hate Crimes Against Native American*. The University of Cultural Competency & Aboriginal Peoples. Arizona Press (24).
- Stolen Sisters: *Discrimination and Violence against Aboriginal Women in Canada*. Retrieved online March 11, 2011 www.amnesty.ca/stolen-sisters.
- Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project. (2002). *A Gathering of Wisdoms: Tribal Mental Health: A Cultural Perspective*. Second Edition. (116).

NATIVE SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL

*Indigenous Social Work
Practices and Theories*

*The Native Social Work Journal is registered with the Canadian
Association of Learned Journals*

Volume 8, August 2012

© 2012 Native Social Work Journal

Published by the Native Social Work Journal
Laurentian University
Sudbury, Ontario

Printed by the Laurentian University Press
Sudbury, Ontario

Cover Artwork by Leland Bell

ISSN 1206-5323
All rights reserved

**NISHNAABE KINOOMADWIN
NAADMAADWIN**