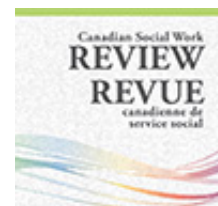


## Canadian Social Work Review Revue canadienne de service social



# SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORKERS IN FRONT-LINE PRACTICE

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Volume 35, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051100ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051100ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for Social Work Education / Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS)

### ISSN

2369-5757 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Burke, S. (2018). SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORKERS IN FRONT-LINE PRACTICE. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social*, 35(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051100ar>

### Article abstract

Indigenous peoples have been reclaiming jurisdiction over their child welfare services and Western society has been increasingly acknowledging that Indigenous peoples are in the best position to provide these services. While the number of Indigenous social workers has historically been low, especially when compared to the population they serve, their numbers seem to be on the rise. In spite of that reality, most social service organizations continue to operate from a Western perspective, with little attention paid to the ways in which they must change in order to provide space for the Indigenous social workers they employ. This study explores the experiences of nine First Nations and Métis social workers in British Columbia (BC). The researcher, a Métis scholar and former child welfare social worker, conducted data collection and analysis through a Métissage framework, using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed nine themes, including the need for (1) Knowledgeable leadership that supports autonomy; (2) Flexibility in practice; (3) Policy that fits both Indigenous and Western paradigms; (4) Relationships with other supportive social workers; (5) Support to navigate overlap between the personal and the professional; (6) Set standards/experienced co-workers; (7) Equitable workplace resources; (8) Respect regarding Indigenous identity, and; (9) Supports to maintain wellness. Recommendations suggest how this information can be used by organizations to better support the Indigenous social workers they employ.

# SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORKERS IN FRONT-LINE PRACTICE

*Susan Burke*

**Abstract:** Indigenous peoples have been reclaiming jurisdiction over their child welfare services and Western society has been increasingly acknowledging that Indigenous peoples are in the best position to provide these services. While the number of Indigenous social workers has historically been low, especially when compared to the population they serve, their numbers seem to be on the rise. In spite of that reality, most social service organizations continue to operate from a Western perspective, with little attention paid to the ways in which they must change in order to provide space for the Indigenous social workers they employ. This study explores the experiences of nine First Nations and Métis social workers in British Columbia (BC). The researcher, a Métis scholar and former child welfare social worker, conducted data collection and analysis through a Métissage framework, using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed nine themes, including the need for (1) Knowledgeable leadership that supports autonomy; (2) Flexibility in practice; (3) Policy that fits both Indigenous and Western paradigms; (4) Relationships with other supportive social workers; (5) Support to navigate overlap between the personal and the professional; (6) Set standards/experienced co-workers; (7) Equitable workplace resources; (8) Respect regarding Indigenous identity, and; (9) Supports to maintain wellness. Recommendations suggest how this information can be used by organizations to better support the Indigenous social workers they employ.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, social work, retention, support

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Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 35, Number 1 (2018) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 35, numéro 1 (2018)

**Abrégé :** Les peuples autochtones ont récupéré la compétence sur leurs services de protection de l'enfance et la société occidentale reconnaît de plus en plus que les peuples autochtones sont les mieux placés pour fournir ces services. Bien que le nombre de travailleurs sociaux autochtones ait toujours été faible, surtout si on le compare à la population qu'ils desservent, leur nombre semble augmenter. Toutefois, le recrutement et le maintien en poste demeurent un problème. Cette étude explore les expériences de neuf travailleurs sociaux des Premières nations et des Métis en Colombie-Britannique (C.B.) au sujet de ces questions. Le chercheur, un chercheur métis et ancien travailleur social de la protection de l'enfance, a effectué la collecte et l'analyse des données dans un cadre de métissage, à l'aide d'entrevues semi-structurées. L'analyse thématique a révélé neuf thèmes, y compris le besoin de 1) leadership éclairé qui favorise l'autonomie, 2) souplesse dans la pratique, 3) politique correspondant aux paradigmes autochtones et occidentaux, 4) relations avec d'autres travailleurs sociaux de soutien, 5) soutien pour naviguer entre le personnel et le professionnel, 6) établissement de normes et apport de collaborateurs expérimentés, 7) ressources équitables en milieu de travail, 8) respect de l'identité autochtone, 9) soutien au maintien du mieux-être. Les recommandations suggèrent comment ces données peuvent être utilisées par les organismes pour mieux soutenir les travailleurs sociaux autochtones qu'ils emploient.

**Mots-clés :** Autochtones, travail social, rétention, soutien

## Introduction

*INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORKERS HAVE BEEN* recruited by social work organizations (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2007; 2016) and academic institutions (Pierce, Hemingway, & Schmidt, 2014; Zapf, 1999) as Indigenous communities have reclaimed their child welfare services and Western society has increasingly acknowledged that Indigenous peoples should be delivering these services. Perhaps in part due to that recruitment, the number of Indigenous social workers has increased; however, both recruitment and retention remain an issue (BCGEU, 2015; Hughes, 2006; John, 2016; Representative for Children and Youth, 2013; 2015; 2017) and Indigenous social workers are disproportionately under-represented relative to the population they serve. Numerous studies have examined Indigenous social work education (Baikie, 2009; Bessarab, 2015; Cross, Day, Gagliotti, & Pung, 2013; Dumbrill & Green, 2008) but few have explored the experiences of Indigenous social workers after they graduate and begin front-line practice. In this article I report on a study that explores these experiences and provide suggestions for how social workers can be better supported within their organizations. This paper's aim is to help fill a research gap and should be viewed as a starting place to better understand the experiences of Indigenous social workers in child welfare practice. The

data for this research stems from a secondary analysis of a larger study that examined how social workers experience value-behaviour conflicts within their work (Burke, 2016). In that study, Indigenous child welfare social workers shared their perceptions of working within child welfare organizations. This research reports on that data.

## Literature Review

### *Social Work and Indigenous Peoples*

This study took place in the province of British Columbia, which has a population of 4,560,240 people (Statistics Canada, 2016). Of that population, 270,585 identify as being Indigenous: 172,520 as First Nations, 89,405 as Métis, and 1,615 as Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Only 7 % of the population of Canadian children are Indigenous, yet statistics around Indigenous children in care show their numbers to be between 51 % (Statistics Canada, 2018) and 85 % (Thomas & Green, 2015). BC's Provincial Health Officer (2002) provided a summary of the issues that have contributed to this staggering statistic:

The high rate of Aboriginal children-in-care reflects the historical disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal communities. Residential schools caused generations to grow up without opportunities to develop parenting skills. Poverty, unemployment, relative isolation, and inadequate housing all contribute to family disruption. When Aboriginal families experience difficulties, they have not always been given the resources and support they need to ensure that children are raised in their home communities and culture. (p. 49)

Despite this chronic over-representation, the majority of social workers have historically been non-Indigenous; however, their numbers do seem to be on the rise. For example, a Canadian-wide study conducted in 1998 on child protection social workers found that only 2 % identified as Indigenous (Fallon, MacLaurin, Trocmé, & Felstiner, 2003). A similar study conducted on the same segment of social workers in 2008 placed that number at 10 % (Kwin, Lefebvre, Fallon, & Trocmé, 2015). More recently, a 2015 report by the BC Government Employee's Union (BCGEU) found that 16 % of provincial government - Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)- social workers and 54 % of Delegated Aboriginal Agency (DAA) social workers identified as being Aboriginal. Although these figures look promising, the number of Indigenous social workers remains disproportionately low when compared to the number of Indigenous children in care, and there continues to be a call for an increase in the provision of social work to Indigenous people by Indigenous people, particularly in the area of child welfare.

*Child Welfare and Indigenous Children in BC*

The idea that Indigenous people should be involved in the delivery of child welfare services to Indigenous children is not new. In BC, where formal child welfare responsibilities have historically been the responsibility of the MCFD, increasing the provision of services by Indigenous peoples has been explored in two primary ways: the establishment of Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) and the recruitment of Indigenous social workers by the MCFD.

**Establishment of DAAs.** Since the 1980s, numerous DAAs have been established in response to a call by Indigenous groups for the return of jurisdiction over their child welfare. Through a process of delegation, the MCFD and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) enter into agreements in which the MCFD legally extends authority to DAAs to carry out specific child welfare duties. Transferring these responsibilities to DAAs has been viewed as a key way for the MCFD to “return historic responsibilities for child protection and family support back to Aboriginal communities” and increase the number of Indigenous people delivering child welfare services to Indigenous children (Province of BC, 2018, para. 2), with a plan for these agencies to be staffed by Indigenous social workers and to use contracted Indigenous service providers wherever possible (Auditor General of Canada, 2008). There are currently 23 delegated Aboriginal agencies in BC with various levels of delegation (Province of BC, 2018).

**Recruitment of Indigenous social workers.** The Child, Family, and Community Services Act (MCFD, 1996), which has guided the MCFD’s provision of child welfare services for the past 20 years, clearly states in its Service Delivery Principles that, “Aboriginal people should be involved in the planning and delivery of services to Aboriginal families and their children...(and) the community should be involved, wherever possible and appropriate, in the planning and delivery of services” (p. 9). At times these words have been interpreted as the need for the MCFD to increase the number of Indigenous social workers it employs. For example, in his review of BC’s child welfare system, Hughes (2006) called on the MCFD to recruit and retain Indigenous peoples at all levels, particularly amongst social workers who work directly with children and families. Similarly, the reports by Grand Chief Ed John (2016) and the Representative for Children and Youth (2015) recommended an increase in Indigenous staff employed by the MCFD. In response to pressures to increase their Indigenous social work staff, the MCFD has recruited Indigenous social workers and has partnered with post-secondary institutions to develop curriculum to train them (Auditor General of Canada, 2008; Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2007; Pierce, Hemingway, & Schmidt, 2014).

In spite of the attempts by both the MCFD and DAAs, the recruitment and retention of Indigenous social workers remain issues. In Hughes’

(2006) report, he noted, “I am given to understand that it has been easier to attract Aboriginal people than to keep them for substantial periods” (p. 62). More recently, the Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) (2013; 2017) and the BCGEU (2015) indicated that both recruitment and retention are problems for DAAs, noting they are fraught with high turnover and ongoing struggles to find qualified staff. These issues suggest that acknowledging the need for Indigenous social workers must be followed not only by their recruitment into practice but also by them being hired by organizations that are able to meet their needs.

### **Situating Self**

Although many research approaches encourage researchers to position themselves within their work, for Indigenous peoples this step takes on added importance as we work to legitimize our projects, including the reclaiming of our knowledges and the ways in which we conduct research (Baskin, 2016; Kovach, 2009). In keeping with that belief, I will begin by providing some personal context for this research study. I am a Métis woman from Northern BC, where I practiced child welfare social work for 20 years before becoming a full-time academic. While my days are now filled with teaching, research, and service in the university and surrounding community, I continue to ponder my past experiences as an Indigenous social worker. There has been a call for post-secondary institutions in Canada to decolonize and indigenize their programs (Cote-Meek, 2014); however, I cannot help but wonder whether the social service organizations that will employ the Indigenous social work students I teach will genuinely provide space for Indigenous social work practice. That question has led to this research study.

### **Method**

As an Indigenous researcher, it was important to me to use a methodology that genuinely honoured my location as a Métis woman. Métis scholar Lowan-Trudeau (2012) describes the third space that Métis people exist within, a space that overlaps with Western and First Nations spaces while at the same time remaining separate and distinct. He describes this Third Space as an “existential and epistemological meeting place where Western and Indigenous knowledge and perspectives collide, mix and mingle to form new cultural expressions and understandings” (p. 118).

Leaders in Indigenous research have proposed commonalities that can be found in Indigenous methodologies (Baskin, 2016; Hart, 2009; Kovach, 2009, 2015); however, due to the heterogeneity between and within Indigenous groups, there is no set template for conducting “Indigenous research.” Generally, Indigenous research methodologies respect our cultural beliefs, honour the ways in which our rites and

social norms are central to our communities, and show our worldviews as being central to how we live, learn, and survive (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). Wilson (2003) notes that Indigenous research paradigms allow Indigenous researchers to “do research that emanates from, honors, and illuminates their worldviews and perspectives” (p. 169) and that they challenge Indigenous scholars to articulate their own approaches to research and their own data collection methods that honour those worldviews. In keeping with that vision, I chose Métissage as the framework for this research study because it provided space for me to honour my identity and worldviews as a woman of both Western and Indigenous ancestry by allowing me to strategically choose from Western qualitative and Indigenous research methods to create a distinct research approach (Donald, 2012).

Although not exclusively a Métis concept, Métissage is a research praxis that has roots in the Canadian Métis tradition as well as in other colonial contexts. With its bold colours that are intermingled through a process of braiding, the Métis sash has been used as an analogy for Métissage research (Donald, 2012). This research study incorporated three main strands in its design. First, a Métissage theoretical framework was used to provide a guiding structure to the research design, allowing for an intentional weaving together of Indigenous and Western research strategies. Second, qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews and thematic coding were used for data collection and analysis. Third, commonly-shared Indigenous philosophical beliefs regarding issues such as relationship-building (Baskin, 2016; Hart, 2009; Kovach, 2009, 2015; Wilson, 2008) and reciprocity (Hart, 2009; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) were used to guide the entire process and to provide direction around ethical decisions. For example, although Research Ethics Board approval was given to conduct the semi-structured interviews via phone, I chose to travel to participants’ communities in order to nurture relationship-building. Many Indigenous groups honour the value of reciprocity by “offering something in exchange for help, support and/or direction” (Hart, 2009, p. 161), including food (Baskin, 2016). I provided a personal gift of homemade jam to each participant because within the Métis community, and my own family, reciprocity is often practiced through the sharing of food.

## Sample

The criteria for participation were as follows: social workers who are or were employed by the MCFD or a DAA in the province of BC where transracial adoption plans for Indigenous children are facilitated. Potential participants were contacted in one of three ways: 1) a gatekeeper emailed invitations to participate to deputy directors and executive directors; 2) I contacted possible participants who I personally knew;



3) and participants were asked to forward letters of invitation to other people who fit the criteria.

The sample consisted of nine women located in five communities across BC. Seven identified as being First Nations and two as being Métis. One of the participants was in her 50s and the rest were in their 30s or 40s. They had a variety of educational backgrounds: all had a Bachelor of Social Work degree, two had an additional undergraduate degree, and three had a graduate degree (two Masters of Social Work). On average, they had practiced social work for nine years and none had fewer than five years of experience. All of the participants had worked at a DAA and three had worked for the MCFD. Due to the overlapping nature of their caseloads, all of the social workers had experienced significant contact with the MCFD as an organization. At the time of the interviews, six of the participants were employed at a DAA, two were working outside of child welfare, and one had left work to attend school.

### **Data Collection**

This study used individual, semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their experiences in the workplace along with more specific questions regarding value/behaviour conflicts, consistent with the original study. This paper is based on the information that participants provided regarding the child welfare organizations that had employed them. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 90 minutes. They were conducted in person after informed consent was obtained from each participant. No one received an incentive to take part, although, as mentioned previously, a small gift was given after each interview.

### **Data Analysis**

All transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis that involves identifying, analyzing, and detailing themes that are found within data. I transcribed each interview for the first research study. For this secondary analysis, hard copies of the transcripts were re-read and notes made around participants' perceptions of the child welfare organizations that had employed them, particularly what they felt had or had not been effective. Then, the most commonly occurring codes regarding the organizations were identified. Finally, I closely examined the patterns arising between coded responses using an inductive, iterative approach, resulting in the creation of sub-themes.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study, including possible limitations



in the data: it comes from a larger study on value/behaviour conflicts; participants were self-reporting their experiences; and the nature of interviews, which allow the interviewer and the interviewee to jointly create a narrative, makes it likely that the social interaction in some way impacts the conversation (Patterson, Markey, & Somers, 2012). The sample may be considered homogenous (i.e. there were no males, new social workers, or those currently employed by the MCFD) and represents a sub-group of child welfare social workers. A more varied sample may have yielded different findings. The sample size was relatively small. The goal of this research was not to generalize findings to all Indigenous social workers but rather to provide a starting-point to explore their needs. Finally, this study was designed to provide insight into the needs of Indigenous social workers and does not provide a political analysis on the topic of Indigenous child welfare.

## Findings

Nine themes arose in the conversations. In the following section, each theme is identified and, then, consistent with both qualitative research methods and widespread Indigenous beliefs regarding the importance of story as a component of decolonizing research, direct quotes are used as a way of ensuring that participants' are heard "in their own voice" (Kovach, 2009, p. 131).

### *1. Knowledgeable Leadership that Supports Autonomy*

Five of the participants were in leadership roles, either as team leaders or executive directors. Their perspectives on leadership were based on their previous roles as front-line workers and on their current roles where others held leadership roles above them (i.e. managers, chiefs). Participants spoke to the importance of strong leadership in the workplace, specifically leaders who support them in making practice decisions that are consistent with what they feel is best for their clients, even when those actions contravene policy. Participants also spoke to the importance of having leaders who share their vision around how the work should be done:

I knew coming over here (from the MCFD to a DAA) I had the potential to do work in the way I wanted to do work and be supported because me and (the director) are very much the same practice, world vision, everything. (Participant 5)

Having autonomy over practice decisions and having a leader who shares your vision often surfaced as a reason for leaving the MCFD to work for a DAA:

(Removing First Nations children from their homes) was heart-breaking work...and maybe you've got a team leader that's giving direction that you're not comfortable with and you...want to still implement different ways of doing it. And that's not being listened to or taken into consideration. I just thought...there's not any way that I'm going to be able to maintain myself if I feel powerless in my role. And so I removed myself from that role and decided to go into the Aboriginal delegated agencies. (Participant 3)

Although participants spoke mostly in positive ways about the leadership at DAAs, several noted challenges in working with community leaders (i.e. chiefs) who often have decision-making powers and yet are not knowledgeable about the realities of social work:

If we can get them the knowledge of what our work is, the goal of our work...I think they would become a true team participant...sometimes it feels like they're against (us)...we're pegged as the bad guy and it's really because they don't have that true understanding. You can't be a true participant if you don't really know what you're participating in. (Participant 7)

Another issue raised was the complexity of navigating different beliefs about who has the final say in decisions. The same participant described a situation where she was supporting a youth in deciding where he would live and the chief stepped in and vetoed their decision:

And the chief...couldn't understand. Like, he's in a different mind-set because he's so used to, "I'm saying this, this is what you've got to do"... that's a hard one because...we still want the chief in the child's life but we don't want it to halt the child growing and we don't want him to, um, step on the child's rights. (Participant 7)

## *2. Flexibility in Practice*

Participants also cited a need to work for an organization that supports them in being flexible and creative in practice rather than following linear, Western processes. Of the seven social workers who noted this issue, each one spoke to practice expectations being more linear within the MCFD than DAAs and of this reality being one of their primary reasons for choosing to work for a DAA. One social worker explained:

Everything is so...everything is CFCSA<sup>1</sup>, right? Everything is Chapter 3. Everything is risk. Standards. Policies. You follow that. If you don't follow that, you run the risk of being unprofessional. And doing a disservice to the children, to the agency, and putting yourself in a tough spot professionally, right?... and what I realized real quick was how they told us how

to work with Aboriginal kids didn't always work. It...wasn't always a good fit because it...felt so clinical. (Participant 2)

The need for flexibility particularly surfaced around the desire for workplaces that allow time for relationship-building. The sense amongst participants was that being in a position where they could take time to build relationships helped them to make thoughtful rather than crisis-driven plans and that it often saved time in the end. One social worker described her work with a DAA:

So I found actually...connecting with community members has helped me build relationships and has helped probably, um, some community members have a better view of me in that I'm not just the person coming in with the social work hat, I'm willing to get in there and help set up food, help set up tables, help clean up, like that human aspect of things. (Participant 1)

### *3. Policy that fits both Indigenous and Western Paradigms*

Another theme that surfaced involved the need for policies that fit the reality of having to work simultaneously within Indigenous and Western paradigms. This need was expressed both as a desire for the MCFD to develop policies that fit with Indigenous knowledge and for DAAs to create policies that fit with Western knowledge (i.e. Attachment Theory). One participant described receiving a cultural plan from a MCFD social worker that called for the community to regularly provide traditional food to the adoptive family:

This document was obviously being written by some far off office by someone who knew nothing about life on the reserve and food gathering from... a First Nations perspective and what it takes to go out there because food gathering is seasonal. Every month there's a different food that you gather and prepare...so what they were asking was not going to happen and I knew the plan wasn't going to work....and I thought all the...people who weren't Indian would sign and say, "yay" and all the Indian people who had to sign were going, "Oh" (laughter) so there was disconnect in the knowledge, the perspective, and the depth of the expectations. (Participant 2)

This participant later summarized her vision for organizations that honour both Indigenous and Western beliefs:

And the willingness to come together and...put together a plan that's more realistic, by all parties involved...I thought I wonder if that could roll over at the provincial or regional, a district level even so that more people would be involved in the development of ordinary policy that

would better develop the needs and the people would understand what the roles and responsibilities were from the Ministry, from the agency, from the community. (Participant 2)

#### *4. Relationships with Other Supportive Social Workers*

When asked about the supports they use to manage their difficult work, many of the social workers spoke to the importance of other social workers for debriefing, friendship, and mentorship. Several pointed out that, due to confidentiality issues and a general lack of understanding about the work, it is difficult to turn to family and friends for support. Participants spoke to the importance of consistency in team members, of being able to meet in person as a team, and of organizations that provide time for informal engagement to do things like “break bread” together. For some of the participants, it seemed the only characteristics needed in a supportive peer were that they be like-minded, trustworthy, and share similar values; however, some specifically mentioned the importance of being able to turn to social workers who are also Indigenous:

Social work is kind of tough. Like, you don’t want to...breach confidentiality (by talking to friends and family) so you can only share so much of even a general situation and I find too it can be tough because I think... people have their views of what social workers do so I think it can be really valuable to have...people that you can talk to that understand the work. Especially other Indigenous social workers because we’ll have the conversations around, oh, so and so called me and thought I was going to take them out of the situation or so and so called me and wants me to take their kids but I’ve already got all this on my plate, and some of the hardship around wearing a million hats (laughter). (Participant 1)

Interestingly, several of the participants noted they routinely turned to a social worker outside of their workplace for support, including one employed by the MCFD or in another type of social work practice.

#### *5. Support to Navigate Overlap between the Personal and the Professional*

Another theme that surfaced involved the need for organizations to help social workers do their work while navigating the feelings that arise when their work converges with their personal lives. This theme arose in two ways: feelings associated with working in your own community and feelings associated with being triggered around the work. One social worker described the emotional turmoil she had experienced working in her home community, where she had never lived:

So it was difficult...knowing that, you know, there is such a huge rate of all sorts of stuff...alcoholism, substance abuse, domestic violence, and working within that, knowing that this is where, you know, my mom lived,

my grandmother lived, this is like, normal to them....being in my home community and my home nation, I think made it much more, um, I guess, intense. (Participant 9)

Another social worker described how her work brought up previous life experiences and she had to work through them while in the workplace:

What really helped was going to my supervisor and being honest...about my past experience. No matter how embarrassing it was. And have those cries. I cried with my supervisor many, many times (laughter)...Because as second generation residential school survivors, we're taught don't show your emotions. You're weak when you cry. Those were lies. And I was wondering why I was so messed up (laughter)...I've been talking about my story. Not just all over to anybody, but in appropriate ways, to appropriate people...For some of the ugly stuff, it never goes away, but when I talk about it and share, it's smaller and smaller and it's not this big monkey on my back anymore. (Participant 8)

Participants spoke to the importance of counselling being available to help them navigate personal life experiences and triggers around their work. Interestingly, although one person spoke to the importance of having counselling available through an Employee Assistance Program, the rest described reasons why they had not accessed this service, citing confidentiality concerns (working with someone in their community who would know their personal information) and seeking assistance from someone who might have less experience than them. Instead, participants described personally paying for counselling services or finding another option within the community (i.e. an Elder, a Residential School survivor program, a church minister). Some participants positively described situations where their organization had brought someone in to offer a therapeutic intervention to them as a group, saying this strategy helped contribute to improved health on both an individual and group level.

#### *6. Set Standards/Experienced Coworkers*

Participants also reflected that one of the challenges of working for a DAA is that there are often no set standards to follow, previous experiences to reflect upon, or experienced staff to turn to in the decision-making process. One described her work in permanency planning, where her DAA was trying to find innovative Indigenous ways to practice:

(It) is just a phenomenal amount of ethical dilemmas and questions and curiosities and often no practice examples or paths, um, it's really, really challenging and it feels, um especially now as a manager, it feels really... heavy with a great deal of responsibility...It's a challenge because sometimes you often feel like I'm standing on a ledge by myself and saying this is the way it should be and, wow, I hope I'm right. (Participant 6)

All but one of the participants who discussed this theme directly compared her experience working for a DAA to that of working for the MCFD and noted that the fact the MCFD has operated for a long period of time provides workers with some advantage.

### *7. Equitable Workplace Resources*

Several participants discussed how funding and resource issues impacted them negatively in the workplace. One suggested that the low wages and lack of unionization within DAAs means it is more difficult for them to retain staff than it is for the MCFD, resulting in high turnover rates. A second participant described how her DAA lacks the support staff (i.e. administrative staff, genealogy workers) that are available at the MCFD, meaning social workers have to do every task on their own. As well, she noted that unfilled social work positions in her DAA meant they had limited back-fill and non-delegated social workers were required to do delegated work.

Social workers noted there is less training available to DAA social workers than to their MCFD counterparts and that they are often expected to do their jobs for years without the required training, which puts them at a marked disadvantage:

And I mean the sad reality is...they're the ones who are given the best training...when I started up with the Ministry, I had six months of training at the Justice Institute, you know? And we sat in courtrooms and we did mock court cases and we did documentation. And then I went over to the Aboriginal agency and we got these little two week stints and I'm thinking, wow, is this really substandard compared to the way the Ministry does it. If our Aboriginal workers could get the same training that the Ministry gets, we would be set up to succeed, you know? ...You begin to question...if you're being set up for failure. (Participant 3)

Participants also noted a need for training to deal with work for which they may have personal biases and/or trauma around (i.e. adoptions). In addition, they noted a need for training regarding how to go about their work in a culturally respectful way, for example what to wear to a potlatch. In keeping with the previously mentioned theme that policies must blend Indigenous and Western knowledge, the point was also made that training can find ways for these to work together. One social worker described a workshop she had recently taken on trauma-informed practice:

And it's interesting because as (the trainer) was talking about some of the tools I was thinking, man, these tools are very in line with Indigenous culture or some of the traditions like talking or singing or things that I think in many communities naturally happen. (Participant 1)

### *8. Respect Regarding Indigenous Identity*

The need for organizations to be respectful of Indigenous identity also emerged and several participants described how their Indigenous identity caused the people around them to place undue expectations on them. One way that surfaced was through them being expected to play token roles within the MCFD:

I felt I was just a cookie cutter expected to do the exact same thing (as the other MCFD social workers) but...I was just filling...a new category so the organization could say they hired this many First Nations people.  
(Participant 4)

One social worker described how she had applied for a local position and instead was given a job that had a two-hour commute from her home so that she could work with an Indigenous community that was not even her own. Another way this theme surfaced was around Indigenous social workers employed at both the MCFD and DAAs being expected to show non-Indigenous social workers how to navigate Indigenous issues: One social worker described this experience at the MCFD:

I felt like a token Indian. I had workers that wouldn't talk to...Aboriginal families and wanted me, begged me, to be there for the conversations.  
(Participant 5)

Another spoke of facing this experience at a DAA:

It can be tough sometimes being an Indigenous social worker because, um, there's an expectation that you're going to teach everybody else. (Another First Nations social worker) said well maybe I'm sick and tired of being the contact and having to take everybody out (to community)... why don't people initiate their own learning? (Participant 1)

### *9. Supports to Maintain Wellness*

Participants also spoke to the importance of a workplace that values wellness. They discussed being supported to have healthy boundaries regarding time spent at work and the disclosure of personal information, creating support systems outside of work so that issues did not spill over into the workplace, and being given time for stress-reducing activities such as going for a run over an extended lunch hour. Two spoke of wellness specifically in the context of cultural activities such as drumming being provided in the workplace and one how the difficulty of her work had caused her to turn to her culture for strength:



I delved more into exploring what my culture is and, um...doing personal smudging for me and drumming and singing and learning different songs and so that was when I went to the DAA, that was encouraged... that kind of kept me going. (Participant 4)

## Discussion

It is important to note that there is significant controversy regarding whether or not DAAs or provincial organizations such as the MCFD should even be providing child welfare services to Indigenous children. In his report on Indigenous child welfare in British Columbia, Grand Chief Ed John (2016) proposed that DAAs and regional child welfare authorities should be viewed as interim measures that have been put in place as we work towards true, full Indigenous jurisdiction over child welfare. It is not, however, within the scope of this paper to debate those controversies. Rather, this discussion is premised around the realities of the current model and on the belief that organizations need to support Indigenous social workers within those realities. These recommendations for change are made with an open and humble acknowledgement of the compelling arguments for entirely dismantling current child welfare systems; with a recognition of the complexity of creating change within established colonial structures; and the understanding that some of these recommendations would be relatively simple to carry forward and others would require extensive time and commitment.

These recommendations may be especially important for consideration by Western organizations such as the MCFD. As stated previously, an estimated 16 % of the MCFD social workers and 51 % of DAA social workers identify as being Indigenous (BCGEU, 2015). These numbers indicate that the MCFD social workers are more under-represented proportionate to the population they serve than are DAA social workers. In addition, research suggests that one of the primary reasons for Indigenous social workers to choose not to work for the MCFD or to leave the MCFD to work for a DAA involves the ways in which these organizations meet their needs (Burke, 2016). With those realities being acknowledged, a discussion about the supports needed by Indigenous social workers cannot be easily separated between suggestions for Western organizations and suggestions for Indigenous organizations because there is significant overlap between the two. In BC, both operate within the same over-arching child welfare legislation; they hire from the same pool of social workers who have generally earned their degrees from the same universities; over time they often employ the same social workers; and due to regulations around delegation, they often share planning for the same cohort of children. Therefore, it is within this context that general recommendations regarding how social service organizations can best support Indigenous social workers will be provided.

Perhaps the most obvious starting place for organizations lies in simply acknowledging that Indigenous social workers face specific challenges, that they cannot be effectively supported within organizations that operate exclusively under a Western framework, and that we must begin to do things differently if we are to recruit and retain them in social work settings. Although one could argue that all social workers are impacted by the intersection between values and practice, for many Indigenous social workers, values and practice decisions are so intertwined that they are inseparable (RCY, 2017). For this reason, it is important to create workplaces where supervisors and front-line staff operate from the perspective of Indigenous worldviews or, at least, make equal space for them alongside Western perspectives. Workplaces that operate from a Two-eyed Seeing perspective, with one eye seeing through the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and the other from the strengths of Western knowledge (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012; Hovey, Delormier, McComber, Lévesque, & Martin, 2017), could provide space for Indigenous social workers to honour their values and beliefs while still operating within child welfare systems. Additionally, a Two-eyed Seeing perspective, which allows for a “dynamic, changing, interactive, and relational process which generates new ideas, understandings, and information” could encourage those processes within organizations (Hovey et al., 2017, p. 1278).

Placing Indigenous social workers and community leaders in places of leadership and policy-development both within Indigenous and Western social work organizations could help create work environments where Indigenous social workers are supported in honouring their values (i.e. long-term, genuine relationship-building as a foundation for successful practice) and working from an Indigenous perspective. In the province of BC, the call for Indigenous leadership is not a new one. John (2016) recommended that the MCFD “recruit and retain Indigenous individuals for leadership positions within the MCFD and ensure that there are plans in place, developed in partnership with Indigenous leaders and Indigenous organizations, that support the success of those individuals who are recruited to these positions” (p. 191). Similarly, the RCY (2014) recommended the MCFD ensure that “at least one person on the senior executive team must be an Aboriginal person” (p. 61). As part of this goal, current leaders can make a point of mentoring Indigenous social workers and social work students and nurturing their capacity-building so that they can in time successfully navigate leadership positions.

Finding opportunities for effective and ongoing relationship-building and information-sharing between and amongst child welfare employees (DAA and provincial government employees at all levels) and community leaders could also help both groups develop an understanding of the challenges and successes experienced by each and could increase the development of collaborative processes. Again, this idea is not a new one.

The Métis Commission for Children and Families BC (2011) noted the importance of building good working relationships with the MCFD and other agencies as well as between Métis political bodies. John (2016) recommended the creation of written protocols and memoranda of understanding as an effective tool for Indigenous communities, DAAs, and the MCFD to navigate the relationship-building process. Establishing such agreements may help ensure that relationship building will remain a priority. Other ways of building relationship include provincial child welfare employees/managers/policy makers spending time in communities engaging in community activities. Community members could be invited to training opportunities sponsored by social service organizations. Engaging in activities together could also promote the creation of supportive friendships and mentorships between front-line social workers. As well, it could provide opportunities for experience and knowledge to be shared between organizations so that newer agencies could benefit from the knowledge of their more experienced counterparts while established organizations could benefit from innovative ideas regarding new ways of doing things.

Indigenous social workers could benefit from workplaces that acknowledge the importance of personal wellness and provide ways for social workers to seek and maintain health. Although all of the social workers interviewed had been employed by organizations that provided free counselling through employee assistance programs, only one spoke positively of this benefit, suggesting it is important to offer a variety of services rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Having Elders spend time in the workplace, offering employees choices around the therapists they utilize, providing access to therapeutic group sessions, and encouraging participation in traditional activities such as drumming groups could also be beneficial to social work health (Goudreau, Weber-Pillwax, Cote-Meek, Madill, & Wilson, 2008). Having supervisors and managers who are knowledgeable about the history of colonization in Canada could also increase the chances of there being empathy and appropriate referrals in the workplace.

Funding disparities have been noted as resulting in numerous issues for DAAs, including problems around recruitment and retention (John, 2016; RCY, 2017). This research supports that claim and suggests that Indigenous social workers employed by DAAs could benefit from equity in funding between government and Indigenous organizations and in particular by this funding being used to provide increased staffing, support services, and training. John (2016) called on Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and the MCFD to create new or revised funding formulas to equalize funding for DAAs and the MCFD. This systemic issue could also be confronted personally by social workers in a variety of ways. Social workers could engage in consciousness-raising by bringing this disparity to the attention of other professionals around

them whenever the opportunity arises. They could campaign their provincial and federal members of parliament to advocate at every level for funding structures that allow those agencies to better meet the needs of Indigenous children and of the social workers in their employment. When organizations do sponsor training events, they can ensure that a broad cross-section of social workers from a variety of organizations are invited to attend so that the cost of the training will have maximum benefit in the community.

## Conclusion

As a profession, *social work* originated out of a Western framework and social work organizations have traditionally operated within that framework. There has been an increasing acknowledgement that some of the disparities that continue to exist for Indigenous children, families, and communities can be addressed by increasing the rates at which Indigenous peoples are providing social services. However, as we move towards that goal and work to increase the numbers of Indigenous social workers, we also have a responsibility to ask ourselves how they can best be supported in the field. Asking this question could reasonably not only result in an increased number of Indigenous peoples who enter the field of social work but also in the number who remain in this profession and who sustain long, consistent positions. This research was undertaken to stimulate a continuing conversation about the experiences of Indigenous social workers in social service organizations and about the recruitment and retention of Indigenous social workers who face challenges inherent in their work.

## END NOTES

1. Child, Family and Community Services Act (CFCSA)

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