



# IN HISTORY'S SHADOW: CHILD WELFARE DISCOURSES REGARDING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE CANADIAN SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL

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Article abstract

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**IN HISTORY’S SHADOW: CHILD WELFARE DISCOURSES  
REGARDING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN  
THE *CANADIAN SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL***

**Jeanette Schmid and Marina Morgenshtern**

**Abstract:** This article reviews all items in the *Canadian Social Work* journal over its almost 90-year history that relate to child welfare practice in an Indigenous context. We review the journal contents as a way of understanding the profession’s voice, noting that a journal’s discursive practice reflects disciplinary discourse and that this journal positioned itself as a platform for social work debates. Our analysis contributes also to the truth-telling and accountability of social workers. While around 10% of the 1500 journal articles focused on child welfare practice, only 9 of these 152 articles addressed child welfare practice with Indigenous children and families. Our discourse analysis highlights that there was contemporaneous silence regarding social work complicity in the residential schools movement, the Sixties Scoop, and the current Millennium Scoop. In the 1980s, sustained critique around the role of social work in perpetuating colonization began to emerge. The journal, though, left child protection discourse unexamined and thus overlooked its role in maintaining dominant Canadian child welfare practice. We suggest that White supremacy and settler colonial discourses support the dominance of the child protection discourse, and that part of decolonizing child welfare practice relates to revealing and resisting these discourses and generating alternative decolonized discourses.

**Keywords:** child welfare, Indigenous, colonization, decolonization, discourse analysis, Canada

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This article aims to unpack the representation of Indigenous child welfare in the Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW) peer-reviewed journal, *Canadian Social Work (CSW)*; first known as *The Social Worker*, published from 1931 to 2019. This analysis is part of our professional accountability as immigrant White settlers contributing to the uncovering of the social work history with Indigenous people in Canada and thereby countering an ontology of forgetting (Pon et al., 2011). Our perspectives nevertheless are shaped by our positionality and are likely to carry biases.

What prompted us to analyze *CSW*'s contents? Beyond simply curating scholarly articles, journals can provide insight into the thinking of a discipline over time. They also exercise power in determining the professional agenda through controlling what is published (McMahon, 2002; Schmid, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Yu, 2018). Indeed, by offering a platform for social work debate around contemporary issues (Novik & Schmidt, 2018), *CSW* intentionally influenced Canadian social work discourse. Professional discourses are sustained (if reinforced by ideological, historical, or contemporary societal positions or other disciplinary narratives), or evolve into new discourses (more acceptable to the discipline), or are replaced by other discourses (Roscoe, 2019): taken as a whole, *CSW*'s contents reflect social and cultural interactions within Canadian social work. Because meaningful contemporary, contextualized, decolonized responses operate in history's shadows, an analysis of *CSW*'s discursive practice allows the critical social worker (a) to understand social work history and social workers' complicity in perpetuating harm or, alternatively, creating liberatory spaces (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2019; van Breda & Sekudu, 2019); and (b) to see how social work (here child welfare), particularly with Indigenous communities, was constructed historically and is reflected in present-day discourses.

This research was also motivated by two related analyses. Yu (2018) reviewed *Australian Social Work* regarding the "Stolen Generation"; the articles reviewed were published during the the 1950s and 1960s, the last decades in which indigenous Australian children were actively being removed in great numbers from their families. Morgenshtern et al. (2022) examined *CSW* regarding social work's engagement with Indigenous people in Canada. The present article carries that investigation further by focusing specifically on the child welfare discourses represented; it complements Yu's discussion by providing a Canadian scenario.

This article is being written in the wake of the news regarding the discovery of unmarked graves of children at the sites of former residential schools in Canada. While these gruesome tidings confirm what Indigenous people already knew, they reactivate grief, loss, and anger. These events underline the importance of attending to our professional history and complicity, and thus strengthened our motivation to present our research.

## Literature Review

Our literature review focuses on key child welfare discourses that inform social work in Canada and Indigenous child welfare. We contextualize Canadian child welfare within Indigenous communities and highlight issues regarding the decolonization of Indigenous child welfare.

### *Mainstream Canadian Child Welfare*

Approaches to dealing with vulnerable children are not universal, each type of child welfare system being informed by a particular discourse (Freymond & Cameron, 2006). As identified by Freymond and Cameron (2006), mainstream child welfare in Canada is rooted in the Anglophone child protection model, described by them as one in which child welfare systems generally do not engage with families until a safety issue or significant risk has been identified. This individualized approach is typically constructed around a single entry point. It frequently assumes an unambiguously identified abuser (typically a parent), expert-driven responses, and legitimate (state-based) intervention and intrusion. The removal of children (though cast as a last resort) and statutory intervention are central, often creating an adversarial experience in which families stand in opposition to child welfare workers and the courts (Freymond & Cameron, 2006). The child protection model has been criticized *inter alia* for resulting in the overrepresentation of racialized and Indigenous children and youth; providing service only to those who fit narrow criteria; marginalizing family voices; prioritizing statutory work over prevention and early intervention efforts (Freymond & Cameron, 2006); and being highly conflictual (Reich, 2005). In the current neoliberal environment, the paternalism, the focus on risk, the reliance on standardized procedural interventions, and the deprofessionalization of social workers have all intensified (Parton, 2016).

Similar critiques have also been raised with respect to the Canadian child welfare system, with Trocmé et al. (2013, 2014) recommending the employment of differential response (thus customizing responses to the severity of reports) and Montgomery et al. (2016) redirecting attention to children's rights as well as issues impacting Indigenous and racialized families. Strategies inferred from this work include child welfare practice responding to structural issues and being strengths-based, debureaucratized, and decolonized. However, rather than transforming the child welfare model, current Canadian social work continues to focus on traditional child welfare issues: using a risk assessment lens — though tempered by a strengths-based framework (Oliver, 2017); maintaining a continuum of care; engaging kinship care; facilitating international and transracial adoption; and managing aging out of care and family reunification (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2013). Indeed, the child protection model has increasing international credence and dominates family social work (Przeperski, 2021; Schmid, 2017) and as such is viewed as immutable (Freymond & Cameron, 2006).

### *Indigenous Issues in Canadian Child Welfare*

The child protection discourse, and dominant child welfare interventions with Indigenous people, may be understood within the context of colonization. Canadian social work literature

underlines that settler colonialism has since the 1800s aimed to eradicate the Indigenous population and culture through conquest, decimation, and assimilation. Initially, because Indigenous parents and Indigenous cultures were cast as savage (Neeganagwedgin, 2019), children were forcibly removed and placed in a schooling system — day or residential — that, in the language of the time, aimed to erase the Indian in them (Methot, 2019), and acculturate them to White, middle-class norms, belief systems, and language. Children often experienced significant, sometimes fatal, abuse and neglect, and were disconnected from their families and cultures (Alston-O'Connor, 2010; Baskin, 2018; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2007, 2016). This resulted in severe intergenerational trauma, even as Indigenous communities demonstrated immense resilience in the face of these eradication and assimilation efforts (Methot, 2019). Social workers of the day justified residential school placements and the “Sixties Scoop” — the removal of several thousand Indigenous children into non-Indigenous care from the 1950s to the 1980s — as rescuing children from poverty and harm (Alston-O'Connor, 2010; Baskin, 2018; Blackstock, 2007, 2009; Fachinger, 2019; Sinclair, 2016; Sinha & Koslowski, 2013); that is to say, they were relying on a child protection discourse. During this period, these Indigenous children had not only to contend with racism and abuse in substitute care, but their sense of belonging as well as their cultural and familial identification were compromised or erased (Fachinger, 2019). Currently, the oppressive trajectory regarding child welfare for Indigenous children and families continues as the “Millennium Scoop”. Indigenous children, like their counterparts in other racialized communities, are markedly overrepresented in the Canadian child welfare system (Hahn et al., 2020; Mahikwa, 2017; McKenzie et al., 2016): according to census data from 2016, more than half of the children in foster care were Indigenous even though they accounted for only about 8% of all Canadian children under the age of 15 (Indigenous Services Canada, 2022).

Child welfare governance as an instrument of settler colonialism has also impacted Indigenous children. Although the needs of Indigenous children on reserves remain a federal responsibility, a 1951 amendment to the Indian Act allowed provincial laws to also apply to Indigenous children (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health [NCCA]; 2017). Since the early 1980s, a system of delegated agencies with various levels of jurisdiction has developed (NCCA, 2017). These agencies are frequently constrained by having to work within the dominant child welfare system and legislation as they deal with resourcing and funding challenges, significant caseloads, and lack of trust regarding authorities (Richard, 2017). There have been some recent efforts, albeit fragmented, to address issues arising out of the Indigenous child’s intersection with child welfare systems. These include greater attention to cultural sensitivity, sustaining Indigenous children’s cultural roots and attachments to their communities of origin, and offering delegated agencies increased independence (Hahn et al., 2020). Despite this, lack of funding parity and inadequate mechanisms for self-determination have been perpetuated, confirming Indigenous children and their families’ second-class citizenship (Blackstock, 2019; Hahn et al., 2020). Because federal support focuses on children on reserves, the needs of Inuit and Métis children, who are not administered under the reserve system, as well as those of Indigenous children in urban centres, tend to be overlooked (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020).

### ***Discourses Inherent in Indigenous Perspectives Regarding Children's Well-Being***

Despite the dominance of mainstream child welfare, Indigenous child welfare approaches are emerging, and it is therefore useful also to understand which child welfare discourses reflect Indigenous perspectives. For example, assumptions informing Indigenous child well-being models (NCCA, 2017) primarily reflect a community care discourse: Indigenous approaches centre the family as a collective; view children as precious gifts; construct belonging as attachment to culture, land, and people; and adopt a holistic perspective that integrates the spiritual (Baskin, 2016; Swanson et al., 2021). The extended family group is assumed to have expertise regarding their own situation and a desire to be involved in decision-making regarding their children (Freymond & Cameron, 2006). The community care discourse sees children's belonging as tied into the family group rather than to an individual parent, and regards the integration of local culture as essential to children's care (Baskin, 2016). There are also elements of a family services model (Freymond & Cameron, 2006), a framework that recognizes that all families may require parenting supports, embraces universality of service, and values solidarity and collaboration. Indigenous child welfare practice additionally reflects a model that integrates developmental social welfare with community development (Schmid, 2010; Butterfield et al., 2015), in that development of community capacity and building on existing knowledges and resources are identified as goals. Finally, because Indigenous child welfare work must comply with provincial legislation and institutions, it thus also adopts, in an uncomfortable marriage, child protection perspectives. Although similar principles inform frameworks across Indigenous practice, communities are developing approaches that are context-dependent and thus specific (Hyslop, 2021; NCCA, 2017). Indigenous child welfare is consequently emerging as a distinct discourse.

The scholarly and grey literature therefore affirms the continuing marginalization of the Indigenous child and family in a settler colonial system. It also identifies that a child protection discourse informs the Canadian system's practices and work with Indigenous children, a model that is incompatible with Indigenous values and discourse (Swanson et al., 2021). An Indigenous child welfare model is being formulated.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

We adopt a critical discourse analysis to guide this study. This conceptual framework assumes that knowledge is created through discourse and discursive practice (Roscoe, 2019; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Discourse is both "constitutive and constituted" (Roscoe, 2019, p. 197); that is, every text is informed by and formed through previous text. In this case we consider how mainstream discourse creates dominant child welfare discourse while itself being shaped by discursive practices. Another assumption is that discourse is political, with dominant discourse representing mainstream societal views (Foucault, 1994). Consequently, political listening (Brown & Potts, 2015) becomes important in understanding how discourses are strengthened, sustained, diluted, interrupted, or eradicated.



Moreover, our work is situated theoretically in critical social work. Critical social work assumes “fundamentally different ... ontological, epistemological, and political assumptions” from mainstream social work (Webb, 2019, p. xxxv), considering, for example, mechanisms of power informing social work encounters (Webb, 2019) that reinforce, disrupt, dilute, or displace certain discourses. Critical social work additionally highlights the subjectivities that are created through discourses (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Another aspect of critical social work pertinent to this article is the interrogation of the social work role and of the social worker’s location and its intersection with social work intervention (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Indeed, critical social work aims to reflexively (re)consider problems to lift out new meanings (Webb, 2019), and accordingly, we revisit how child welfare with Indigenous populations has been constructed and find relevance in this to the current context and practice of child welfare.

### **Methodology**

Our discourse analysis methodology intersects with our conceptual and theoretical framework. We use critical discourse analysis to highlight, contrast, and compare the various discourses reflected in the relevant articles, and to identify dominant and subordinate discourses (Roscoe, 2019). This process conforms to the “archaeology” of Foucault’s history of the present (Rabinow, 1984). The articles identified constitute the artifacts in this study and as units of data might be compared to interviews in other studies. We then also consider the relationships of these artifacts to one another to draw out meaning, using Foucault’s method of “genealogy” (Rabinow, 1984). Wodak and Meyer (2001) characterized this Foucauldian approach as lifting out unique discourses by attending to the “structure” or “discourse strands” in a text, identifying “discourse fragments” through “fine analysis”, and finally understanding the “entanglement” of such discourses (p. 47). They asserted that such analysis allows the researcher to speak to the “history, present and future” of particular discourses (p. 48).

We adopted various strategies to select relevant French and English articles from the *CSW*. First, with a focus on understanding discourses relevant specifically to Indigenous child welfare practice, we searched for those digitized and non-digitized articles that contained the terms “Indigenous”, “Aboriginal”, “Native”, “Indian”, “Inuit”, “Metis”, “Colonization”, “Residential Schools”, and “Child Welfare”. We established that out of 1500 articles published over almost 90 years, around 10% (152) focused on child welfare issues. Of the 152 articles, nine dealt directly with matters pertaining to Indigenous child welfare. (See Table 1 below). These nine were all in English. We then scoured each of the nine articles to identify phrases that suggested unique discourses. Next, we conducted a thematic review of the emergent discourses (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), initially identifying apparent discourses and then weaving these categories together into the “entanglement” of larger themes to articulate primary discourses. Finally, both researchers reviewed the material, allowing for confirmation of the themes identified and thereby promoting trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016). We were attentive not only to familiar discourses but also to those that might be considered more marginal (Roscoe, 2019).

To provide context to our analysis, our discussion is informed by a review of all the articles published in the journal regarding social work with Indigenous people, as well as those articles discussing child welfare more generally. We identified these further articles by reviewing the tables of contents, as well as going beyond the search terms to use our experience to identify any further articles potentially related to child welfare. In addition, we scanned the occasional presidential, executive director, national, and provincial CASW reports published in the journal, which appeared mainly in the 1980s, and looked through the four articles that discussed the nature of social work. These additional sources are also reflected in Table 1 below and marked as “contextual”.

Table 1. *Data Sources Reviewed for the Study*

| A#               | Year | Title   | Authors                                    |
|------------------|------|---|--|
| A2               | 1981 | Child Welfare and Native People: The Extension of Colonialism   | Pete Hudson & Brad McKenzie                |
| A6               | 1986 | Still Not Home: The Indian and Native Child and Family Service Provisions of Ontario’s Bill 77  | Frank Tester                               |
| A7               | 1988 | Culturally Selective Perceptions in Child Welfare Decisions   | Reginald T. Durmon                         |
| A8               | 1993 | Rural Yukon: Innovations in Child Welfare   | Michael Hodgson                            |
| A9               | 1995 | Collaborative Decision Making in Child Protection Cases   | Alex Scheiber                              |
| A11              | 2003 | Colonization as Disease: Native Adoption and Cultural Genocide  | Wesley Crinchow                            |
| A12              | 2005 | Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Child Welfare Organizations: The Practitioner’s Perspective   | Christopher J. Walmsley                    |
| A13              | 2005 | Implementing the Youth Criminal Justice Act: Can a Metis Youth Justice Committee Serve the People?  | Sharon Small                               |
| A14              | 2011 | The National Arts and Youth Demonstration Project: Removing Barriers to Participate for Youth of Color and Aboriginal Youth               | Robin Wright, Giovanni Burgos, & Eric Duku |
| A25              | 2016 | Navigating Through Systems: The Journey of Young Mothers to Adulthood   | Peter Smyth                                |
| A1 <sup>a</sup>  | 1935 | Welfare Services of the Federal Government of Canada  | Barbara M. Finlayson                       |
| A16 <sup>a</sup> | 1947 | Joint Submission of Canadian Association of Social Workers and Canadian Welfare Council to the Senate Commons Committee on Indian Affairs | Nora Lea                                   |
| A19 <sup>a</sup> | 1949 | Manitoba Branch Studies the Metis   |  |
| A18 <sup>a</sup> | 1951 | Social Work with Indian Affairs   | Helen Martins & Jane Bartlett              |
| A3 <sup>a</sup>  | 1984 | Manitoba CASW Report  | John Chudzik & Jean Boyes                  |
| A27 <sup>a</sup> | 1984 | Saskatchewan CASW Report  | Otto Dreidger, Beth Predy, & Diana Ralph   |
| A4 <sup>a</sup>  | 1984 | British Columbia CASW Report  | Marilyn Callahan & Chris Walmsley          |



| A#               | Year | Title   | Authors   |
|------------------|------|---|---|
| A5 <sup>a</sup>  | 1988 | Alberta CASW Report   |   |
| A20 <sup>a</sup> | 1989 | Alberta CASW Report   |   |
| A21 <sup>a</sup> | 1989 | Saskatchewan CASW Report  |   |
| A28 <sup>a</sup> | 1994 | Breaking Free: The Viewpoint of Aboriginal Women  | Josephine Mandamin  |
| A22 <sup>a</sup> | 1998 | The Government as Customer. Purchaser of Child Welfare Services                           | Burt Galaway & Joe Hudson   |
| A23 <sup>a</sup> | 1998 | The Government as Policy Maker Provider. Against Contracting Out                          | Brian Wharf   |
| A10 <sup>a</sup> | 1998 | Social Work: Our Roots, Our Future  | Glenn Drover  |
| A15 <sup>a</sup> | 2002 | Needs and Challenges of Foster Parents  | Jason Brown & Peter Calder  |
| A24 <sup>a</sup> | 2002 | Factors Affecting Timely Permanency Planning for Children in Care                         | Jo-Anne Lodermeier, Deborah Hammond, Hayley Henderson & Nicole Carralbo |
| A17 <sup>a</sup> | 2014 | Promoting Equity for a Stronger Canada: The Future of Canadian Social Policy: CASW Report | Glenn Drover, Allan Moscovitch, & James Mulvale                         |
| A26 <sup>a</sup> | 2016 | Reformulating Understanding of Productivity for Clinical Social Work Practice             | Jeffrey W. More, Barney D. Williams Jr., & Judy Gillespie               |

<sup>a</sup> These articles are contextual.

Due to the small number of articles and the large gaps between their dates of publication, inferences could generally not be made regarding the articles' discourses and their historical context, thus not allowing for coherent, substantive, thick discourses to be developed. Nevertheless, meaningful commentary can be offered.

As White immigrant women settlers, identifying as allies, we were alert in our analysis to the ways in which the dominant child welfare discourse has entrenched colonial perspectives. However, we aimed also to identify nuance within what first appeared to be monolithic discourses, while recognizing that our biases might lead us to stereotyping positions and thus missing alternative discourses.

### Findings

In reflecting the discourses excavated by our analysis, we maintain the language used in the original articles to offer a credible and authentic rendering of the discourse. We also avoid identifying the specific articles by author because the artifact and its associated discourses are constituted by the article contents, though each article is referred to as A#. Where the author has self-identified as Indigenous, we have taken this into account in our analysis, noting that social location affects how and what is said. On the one hand, the analysis uncovered silenced or omitted discourses pertaining to the abuses of the residential schools and child welfare practices as these occurred; on the other hand, critical social work discourses on other topics are present.

### ***Silenced, Subjugated, or Omitted Discourses***

We begin by identifying what is not there and what has been marginalized. The topic of child welfare pertaining to people identified as Indigenous is explored only minimally in a subset of nine articles. Another general omission is that the needs of Inuit and Métis children are overlooked, as are the needs of urban First Nations children.

Next, there is a glaring gap in coverage regarding residential schools and the Sixties Scoop at the time when children and their families were being impacted by these movements. While we acknowledge that the few child welfare articles available cannot provide a consistent child welfare history, the absence of any relevant articles and the overwhelming silence is surely significant, nevertheless. This echoes Yu's (2018) observation that in Australia the Stolen Generation was simply not discussed while it occurred. Only later are these horrors named. The Millennium Scoop also has not been problematized as a replication of earlier colonizing patterns. Although the CASW reports discussed matters such as international engagement and activism and reflected a sense of social justice by highlighting local advocacy around a range of issues from social security to HIV/AIDS to violence in the home, awareness of Indigenous matters seldom surfaced.

Silence about colonizing child welfare practices is overlaid with other discourses that endorse what are now viewed as harmful practices, such as *CSW*'s support in its early days for residential schools: one contextual 1935 article describing the government's welfare services, states that Indian Affairs "through its 120 agencies seek[s] to bring opportunity to the 112,510 Indians of the country. Residential and day schools, as well as vocational instruction, serve to train the Indian for a useful productive life" (A1). Another example is reflected in a 1998 article noting that social work might consider "the 1960s and the 1970s a halcyon period to which we should and can return" (A10), the author referring to a time of significant welfare reform.

While silence regarding harms done by social work and the profession's complicity in bringing them about is characteristic of the time during which these abuses were perpetuated, the general overlooking of the needs of Indigenous people is also apparent in later articles, with issues of race and ethnicity being obscured. As such, a 2002 article talking about foster care suggests that cultural differences relating to Indigenous children in care are a challenge, but what these might constitute, or mean, is not discussed (A15). Similarly, another 2002 contextual article (A24) that did not focus on Indigenous issues notes that many foster parents felt that biological families "interfered", but it did not explore how this behaviour intersected with the families' cultural heritage and intergenerational experience. Moreover, two articles from 2016 that appear after the Truth and Reconciliation Report's publication (2015) explicitly talk about Indigenous issues (such as reformulating productivity in clinical practice, A26; discussing a culturally relevant group for young mothers, A25). They do not, however, discuss the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care and the displacement of children from their families and culture that characterize the Millennium Scoop, even though these appear to be evidence of the replication of colonialism.

Additionally, by not using the language of a Millennium Scoop, they avoid making visible any continuity in child welfare practice with the Sixties Scoop.

There are gaps also in what initially appears to be more progressive discourse, in that not all the critically informed child welfare journal articles apply their thinking to Indigenous populations, despite the matters discussed having implications for Indigenous families and communities. For example, a 1995 article discussing anticipated legislation providing for collaborative family engagement situates dominant child welfare strategies, adversarial court processes, and court delays as disempowering to families, while also suggesting that the family group's expertise must inform child welfare decision-making (A9). In another contextual article from 2014, a lengthy CASW treatise to the Harper government, calling for an equity framework through coordinated federalism, contains just one brief statement maintaining that without such support First Nations will be adversely affected. Overall, the specific needs of Indigenous families are not addressed, perpetuating the invisibility of Indigenous populations in what appears initially to be more progressive discourse. There are a few exceptions, which we discuss later.

Thus, wrongdoing against Indigenous children was not contemporaneously named as such in *CSW*. Indeed, the mainstream voice of child welfare as reflected in this journal did not recognize harm until many years later in 2009. Even progressive discussion overlooked Indigenous issues, rendering the presence —indeed, the overrepresentation — of Indigenous and racialized children invisible in favour of a universal (White) child.

### *A Critical Voice*

In contrast to the silence and omissions, another discourse emerges. This discourse critiques mainstream contemporary and historical processes. It reflects concerns regarding cultural issues, inappropriate legislation, and colonizing processes, and offers some alternative ways of addressing these.

### *Limited Critique*

Critique offered in the first 50 years of the journal is circumscribed. For example, a 1947 CASW brief to Indian Affairs suggested that while residential schools might have their place for “Indians” that are “nomadic”, the schools should *not* be used to address neglect or delinquency, the implication being that the purpose of the schools was education rather than addressing welfare concerns (A16). The brief moreover appeals for Indigenous people to be recognized as full citizens; for meaningful state resourcing, public assistance, and education; and for quality social service delivery by qualified social workers and skilled Indian agents.

Adopting a similar voice, a 1951 contextual article, discussing social work with Indian Affairs, sees residential schools as valid for educational purposes but does recommend supporting young adults after their residential school attendance to adjust to life in an urban setting (A18). The focus seems to be on social workers ensuring that this group transitions smoothly into dominant society and does not disrupt it. Even so, this report does point out that “Indians” were the first citizens of

Canada, that Indigenous youth find it difficult to find jobs because their “past records and race” are held against them, and that Indigenous people are “too frequently isolated from assistance”. While highlighting system deficits, the article does not point to any needed transformation of the child welfare approach or to the harms being committed.

In 1949, the Manitoba CASW branch explored the impact of child and family social work on the Métis (A19). In this brief, they suggested that service “should be equally available to all citizens” and that the Métis were entitled to their own way of life. The article recommends that social workers have an awareness of “Indian tradition” and should adopt a community approach, not an individualized one. The article also calls for adequate staffing, “special training” for child welfare employees, adequate safety rules and procedures regarding adoptions, and children remaining with their own families. Further recommendations include social workers supporting “adopting or foster parents [to] accept the child of partly Indian descent, recognizing not only the need of the child, but also the fact that the potentialities he brings to the childless home do not differ in any important respect from those of other children in the community”. The article’s critique of the Indian Agent system is implied rather than explicit.

Consequently, these pieces, while pointing to inadequate government responses, sustain an ethnocentric lens that allows dominant practice to largely remain in place. For decades, then, we have silence (and assumed acquiescence) rather than any opposition or resistance to the colonial agenda.

### *Development of Explicit Critique*

A more critical discourse begins with a slate of articles that specifically question the intersection of child welfare with Indigenous communities. For example, a 1981 article was the first to table the various abuses that the child welfare system has perpetrated against “native” children and their families, evidenced in the significant overrepresentation of Indigenous children (A2). The system “has not always acted in the best interests of clients”, Indigenous communities only having a relationship with child welfare workers at the point of removal. Inadequate funding was exacerbated by provincial versus federal jurisdictional tussles. The article emphasizes that Indigenous children placed with White families or in institutions did not fare well. Moreover, the article asserts that psychosocial theories of human development, anthropological notions of cultural conflict, and socioeconomic explanations lead to inappropriate or simplistic solutions. In their place, the article offers an analysis problematizing colonialism and understanding “the location of power and decision-making structures within dominant society”. This article is thus the first to name contemporary disproportionality and cultural harms in the removal of children, to frame the discussion within colonization, and to advance self-governance regarding child welfare issues. Indeed, the article’s authors offer steps towards decolonization: First, ensure the “transfer of autonomy and control of mandated child welfare services to the communities and culture that are affected”; second, adopt “the principle of cultural bonding”; and third, redefine the “client-worker relationship”, which includes seeing the “family as the primary client” and children as part

of the collective extended family and community. These principles are consistent with Baskin's (2016) discussion of Indigenous child-rearing and helping practices, the community care model identified by Freymond and Cameron (2006), and Native American social work practice as described by Swanson et al. (2021). The article accurately predicts:

These innovations will not be facilitated by the growing preoccupation with issues of technique and traditional methods of social work intervention and control which are becoming more evident within social service education, and the many agencies involved in providing child welfare services to native people.

The article's position is remarkable, coming before other formal recognition of the wrongdoings inherent in the child welfare system.

A 1986 article offers a critique of Ontario's Bill 77, an amendment to the Indian and Native Child Act. The title of the article, "Still Not Home", signals that while the bill is a step in the right direction, it fails to address issues regarding meaningful self-governance for Indigenous people (A6).

An article two years later, in 1988, points to "non-Indian" workers being twice as likely as their Indigenous counterparts to label "Aboriginal" children as in need of care or as having behavioural problems, perhaps because "dominant society places strong value on educational, legal and other institutions" (A7). Indigenous workers instead prioritize families and communities and consequently produce qualitatively different assessments. To minimize culturally selective perceptions that result in the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system, the article recommends hiring Indigenous workers to engage with Indigenous populations.

At about the same time as these critiques were published, some CASW reports included limited commentary on the issues raised. In 1984, three provincial reports reference child welfare with Indigenous communities, offering a more critical perspective than in the past. For example, the Manitoba report (A3) calls for child and family services to be extended to "every Native Indian reserve in the province", noting that the province was the first to transfer "legal mandate and responsibility to Native controlled agencies" and to offer training in a competency-based model. In the same year, the Saskatchewan report identified that the branch was "lobbying for greater Native control over services affecting families of Indian ancestry" and wanted to "focus on balancing the role of government with that of parents via expanded commitment to preventive services, re-definition of child apprehension provisions and more involvement from the Indian community in childcare matters" (A27). Similarly, the British Columbia report (A4) points to "the necessity for BC social workers to develop an intercultural perspective ... in work with Native Indian families". Connections had been developed with Native community representatives "prior to, or instead of, apprehension of children". The report underlined these concerns by stating that "since the 1960s, approximately 40% of children in care have been of Native Indigenous origin,

although they make up only 3.5% of the children under 19 in the province”. The report notes that one band had adopted responsibility for providing social services to its children, and that there were many strengths in this approach.

In 1988, the Alberta CASW report noted that they would establish a working group around the “placement of children with Native heritage” (A5) and in 1989 had begun developing a position paper around “Native children’s mental health” (A20). In 1989, the Saskatchewan CASW report also announced its intention to formulate a position paper on “Native child welfare” (A21). These reports show the influence of the Kimelman Report (1985), which named as cultural genocide such child welfare practices as the forcible removal of children from their families and communities, and appears to have impacted social work awareness of the issues surrounding dominant child welfare practice with Indigenous groups.

In the next decade, a 1993 article speaks to the potential use of the Indigenous local Justice Council in place of the Yukon Territorial Court for child welfare matters as a means of foregrounding Indigenous expertise and culture (A8). Advantages identified are cultural appropriateness, the empowerment of the local community, and a consensus, rather than an adversarial, approach. Plans made in this forum blend conventional approaches (e.g., family and substance-use counselling) with culturally informed responses (e.g., a local bush retreat). The collaboration is not only with the family group, but with the relevant Indigenous community and speaks to self-determination not only on the micro but also meso and macro levels of governance. A 1995 article draws issue with the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child welfare (A9). Placing these children in care is seen as eroding their cultural heritage.

A 2003 article offers further critique, labelling “native adoption” out of the community as “cultural genocide” and thereby echoes Kimelman’s (1985) sentiments from almost two decades earlier (A11). The article further argues that child welfare legislation’s use of “best interests” is racist, placing the rights of the individual over those of the community, subordinating Indigenous cultures and heritage to Western notions of bonding, and marginalizing the importance of land and ancestral heritage to “urban Aboriginal people”, themes later developed by Sinclair (2016). The article suggests that Canada constructs legislation as “neutral” (thus obscuring the political dimension of legislation), reinforcing de Montigny’s (1995) contention that language is used to set up the child welfare system, with its workers and its processes, as the objective authority.

A diversity of other topics is taken up in the new century. Some relate to the increasing influence of neoliberal thinking. For instance, there is a 1998 debate reflected in two articles about the legitimacy of the government purchase of child welfare services and their associated commodification (A22; A23); in 2002, an article takes issue with child welfare system service users being cast as “cases”, its author maintaining that such a “technocratic” construction primarily benefits the system by allowing it through case management to label, “count, classify and control” those involved with the system (A24). While the 2002 article’s focus is on child welfare generally, it is noted that the associated definition of permanency planning (a systemic process that offers



continuity of relationship in a family) overlooks a “flowing pattern of care” (where children may move between households) that might be favoured in Indigenous contexts. An article in 2005 appears to assume that technocratic, hierarchical approaches in dominant child welfare systems give rise to contrasting organizational cultures in “Aboriginal” and “non-Aboriginal” child welfare organizations. The article identifies Indigenous agencies as being less hierarchical — paying workers greater respect and providing them more discretion than non-Indigenous organizations — and suggests that these are important differences which may impact worker’s decision-making (A12). Together with the 1988 article (A7) regarding workers’ differential approaches to assessment that was referenced above, the implication is that Indigenous workers and an Indigenous-informed environment foster collaborative approaches amongst staff and with the populations they serve, which aligns with a community care model (Freymond & Cameron, 2006; Swanson et al., 2021).

In sum, this set of articles offer a critical narrative and some counter-storying to the dominant discourse that is focused on general child welfare issues and that silences or obscures wrongdoing of the system regarding Indigenous children and families. The critiques centre around the implications of adopting a colonizing approach that ignores the collective communal approaches preferred by Indigenous families, and the long-term impact of such engagement.

### **Discussion: Genealogy**

We have identified in the archaeology two primary discourses: one that emphasizes the contemporaneous silence in the journal regarding residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the Millennium Scoop; and another that challenges the child protection system regarding its problematic and oppressive engagement with Indigenous people. These discourses demonstrate that for a lengthy period the profession chose to ignore the significant harm being perpetrated against Canada’s Indigenous children. More recently, the journal has created space for debate and critical voice, allowing readers to learn about some of the concerns associated with child protection systems in Canada. Even so, the journal never directly acknowledged its silence at a crucial time, nor explicitly identified the reproduction of harm during the Millennium Scoop as a recreation and even intensification of past practices.

*CASW* offered social workers a space to engage in debate regarding social work matters. As such, the articles it published tended toward professional reflections and commentaries, rather than formal research studies. Our analysis suggests that this format did not promote scrutiny and critical reflection, instead allowing contributors to present materials that were typically infused with mainstream colonial and assimilative agendas.

How does one explain the silence regarding the residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the Millennium Scoop as these occurred? Why has there not been any comment in the journal regarding this silence? In offering our analysis, we recognize that *CASW* may have taken stances

that are not reported on in the journal. Again, though, our exploration is on what stands in the record of this journal.

### ***Discourses Reflective of the Period***

Various factors may have contributed to the silence. The types of discourses appearing in the journal, and the overlooking, ignoring, or silencing of others, seem to be reflective of the period. Even the muted criticisms offered would have been unusual for their time, though it is notable that by 1907 Dr. Peter Bryce had already made known his deep concerns regarding residential schooling (Blackstock, 2009).

Criticism has become more acceptable with the rise of critical social work, anti-oppressive social work, and Indigenous social work approaches (Pon et al., 2011), and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015b) calls to action on child welfare, which recommended ongoing reporting of numbers of Indigenous children in care, improved funding and resourcing, and greater autonomy for Indigenous authorities and child welfare organizations, among other measures (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). There is thus less reluctance involved in offering a critique of historic and contemporary child welfare practice. Canadian social workers also appear to have been responsive in recent decades to critical reports such as Kimelman's (1985) report. Although the articles appearing in in the journal's last years of publication tended to be critical, collectively, the *CSW* articles on child welfare with Indigenous groups do not present a consistent and strong critique.

### ***White Supremacy and Colonialism***

The role of White supremacy, and social work's adherence to the moral economy of the White ruling class, in the construction of the Canadian social work agenda may account for the long, overwhelming silence regarding the residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the Millennium Scoop (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Pon et al., 2011): these factors apparently overrode the ethics and values of the profession. White supremacy is also reflected in the fact that few contributors to the journal were Indigenous (indeed, it was not until 1994 that an Indigenous author identified themselves as such in the journal, A28); in earlier decades, the few Indigenous social workers that there were perhaps would not have been given voice or may themselves have assumed that there was no place for their voice.

Alongside White supremacy, an analysis of settler colonialism suggests that dominant society maintains discursive practices that sustain assimilation and eradication (Fortier & Wong, 2019; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). Carriere (2018), citing Regan (2010), observed that Canada resorts to bureaucratic responses that draw on a mythology of it as a peacemaker; in social work, "helping" is a way of suggesting engagement in reconciliation while avoiding actual transformation. Indeed, this is evidenced in the ongoing lack of political will for substantive change, with the state not responding meaningfully to a series of reports, including the 1985 Kimelman Report; the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People; the 2000 First Nations Child and Family Services Joint

National Policy Review (McDonald & Ladd, 2000); Blackstock et al.'s 2005 report “*Wen:de: We are Coming to the Light of Day*”; the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015a) report; the 2016 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling (First Nations Caring Society, 2016); and the 2019 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Similarly, despite acknowledging such reports in its more recent articles, we do not observe in the journal demonstrable shifts in dominant child welfare practice.

### ***The Dominance of the Child Protection Model***

Another significant factor that may reinforce the intransigence of the child welfare system regarding systemic change is the construction of the child protection model as universal and thus not subject to challenge. Reflexivity is limited if the discourse is viewed as the only one available. The child protection discourse is evident in the articles' assumption that child *protection* is the primary task, and in the authors' opinions regarding when, where, and how social work might intervene. The critical articles present the child protection *system* as harmful to Indigenous children and families due to, inter alia, (a) systemic racism, cultural blindness, and incompatibility with Indigenous values; (b) a lack of understanding of the role of structural issues; (c) restricted Indigenous self-determination; and (d) an increasingly technocratic, neoliberal, approach. Though the critiques offered in the journal point to how the system might need to change, they do not problematize the child protection discourse, accepting that it is the responsibility of the state (or its delegated authority) to intervene when a child is at risk or has been abused. The discourse in the journal thus does not unsettle the fundamental assumptions of the child protection discourse and ignores how historic and ongoing colonization have operated through this discourse. The immutability of this discourse is in turn strengthened through individual social workers who, inducted into child welfare systems, fear reprisals including loss of employment, and adopt organizational professionalism, which, to paraphrase Fenton (2019), is informed by following directives, routinizing work, and “othering” service users.

Looking at recommendations for change from sources other than *CSW* shows that the child protection discourse is so immovable that most recommendations lie within the frame of this discourse and thus fall short of calling for transformation of the system. Caldwell and Sinha (2020) recommended adopting a different understanding of neglect and a different approach to addressing it through legislation, while Fuchs (2018) suggested strengthening Indigenous family reconnection and kinship care, drawing on community knowledge and collaborative practices, creating access to such knowledge and practices, treating parents as experts, doing rights-based work, shifting the assessment of kinship care, resisting standardized approaches, and educating and training child welfare staff. Additionally, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015b) recommended ensuring parenting programs are culturally informed, and tracking the numbers of Indigenous children in care.

Indeed, Canadian child welfare systems now promote cultural competence, cultural continuity, family involvement, and the increased hiring of Indigenous social workers, even entrenching these

through legislation and policy. These corrections, although important, are insufficient, as they do not fundamentally change child protection assumptions. Moreover, Indigenous authorities are still required to work within the ambit of Western-informed child protection legislation that privileges statutory intervention. As our analysis shows, emergent tensions in child welfare practice tend to be resolved by dominant practice reasserting itself and thereby diluting any potentially meaningful change.

The perceived immutability of the child protection model and its associated discourse is indirectly revealed by the fact that in the articles reviewed this foundational discourse is not problematized. Neither is the discourse named as the source of fundamental discrimination and ongoing oppression of Indigenous children, their families, and communities by the social work community more generally. However, a strengthened critique might unsettle this dominant framework, suggest another discourse, and interrupt social work complicity. Montgomery (in Fuchs, 2018) suggested that the assumed truths of the child welfare system should be challenged. Recognizing that each child welfare model has a different effect on interactions with the vulnerable child, family, or community, and impacts the roles of service providers differently (Katz & Hetherington, 2006), and, moreover, that child welfare systems are constructions based on societal values, social workers must ask how we have come to such a narrow understanding of child welfare. We must expose the dynamics of power flows in the child protection system and show who benefits, identify its inherent inequities and how the exercise of power is maintained, and articulate how systemic racism is ingrained in the child protection discourse and its fundamental assumptions about children and families. Such interrogation must extend not only through practice and organizational culture, but also to funding and legislation. Baskin (2016) and Fuchs (2018) have recommended developing legislation with Indigenous people in mind. This is important, though policy and legislative change need to replace child protection assumptions with a holistic, collaborative approach that decentres issues of protection, reframes safety, and foregrounds the well-being frameworks that Indigenous communities are proposing. Additionally, social workers must recognize how neoliberalism operates through the dominant child protection discourse with its emphasis on blame and individual responsibility. Fenton (2019) suggested that social workers be transparent in acknowledging that child welfare work is not about social justice but instead is about risk management. An alternative discourse should prioritize and incorporate Indigenous knowledges, address structural issues (such as housing and food insecurity), recognize communal aspects of family, promote collaborative models that include collective decision-making, and advance meaningful self-governance. Child welfare practice could therefore engage at micro, meso, and macro levels, and integrate child, family, and community well-being.

In developing alternatives, the work that is already being done must be acknowledged. There are, for example, encouraging anecdotal reports that child welfare models informed by Indigenous principles and managed by Indigenous communities keep children safely in their communities (see, e.g., Hyslop, 2021). Whatever alternatives emerge, appropriate resourcing will be required.

We recognize that this is an ongoing challenge but suggest that directing funding towards what amount to bandaied corrections of the child protection system is counterproductive.

Our focus has been on the impact of dominant child welfare practices on Indigenous children and families. Critiques of child protection (such as that of Freymond & Cameron, 2006) position the system as harmful, alienating, gender-biased, discriminatory, and adversarial, disempowering all children and families engaged by it. The child protection system has, since its inception, targeted families who are poor and racialized (Chapman & Withers, 2019; de Montigny, 1995). Interrogation of the child protection discourse and consideration of alternatives thus would be advantageous to all who are served through this system; it is therefore incumbent on social workers to decolonize child welfare practices (Sinclair, 2007, 2016).

### Conclusion

We have undertaken an analysis of the articles in *CSW* related to Indigenous child welfare and shown how the histories of Canadian child welfare and social work adherence to the socially dominant discourses of White supremacy, settler colonialism, and child protection help maintain today's taken-for-granted practices. We recognize that this study represents the discourses in this journal only and cannot be seen as representing Canadian child welfare discourse in its entirety, though the tracking over almost nine decades does have merit as a historical representation of issues. We also appreciate that our sample is limited and that even where indications of subordinate discourses are visible, these could mostly not be substantiated through other examples. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrates, that, on the one hand, Canadian social workers did not at the time use their professional journal to speak to the abuses of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the emergent Millennium Scoop. On the other hand, this professional journal has, particularly in recent years, presented articles that contribute to a critique of the Canadian child welfare system's interactions with Indigenous communities and the ways in which they have substantially harmed Indigenous children, families, and communities. As such, *CSW* has encouraged professional social workers to examine their practice and to begin considering what the decolonization of child welfare might involve. Despite the emergence of these later, and important, critiques of the child welfare system in relation to Indigenous children and their families, they usually do not sufficiently interrogate the fundamental assumptions underpinning the child protection discourse that shapes the systemic response, thus leaving this discourse in place. Indeed, it is imperative to interrupt the worldview that generated the extensive harm against Indigenous people (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Noting that child protection discourse perpetuates colonization, we have suggested how this discourse might not only be unsettled but disrupted.

Social workers remain largely complicit in sustaining neoliberal child protection discourses, White supremacy, and settler colonialism, with all of the associated harms for Indigenous children, families, and communities. They are accordingly hindering the shift to a collaborative approach that centres Indigenous and other ways of knowing and that would focus resources on addressing

structural issues while providing individual, familial, and community healing. The fundamental assumptions of a child protection discourse are woven intricately and deeply into the fabric of Canadian child welfare. Even though unravelling this fabric to create a meaningful alternative, particularly for Indigenous and racialized children, is challenging, social workers must demonstrate moral courage (Baskin, 2016; Blackstock, 2009; Fenton, 2019). They must be intentional about confronting and resisting prevailing orthodoxies and aim to develop an alternative discourse and associated model, thus going beyond the record of *Canadian Social Work*.



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