Chapter 1

Bridging the Past and the Future
An Introduction to Indigenous Social Work Issues

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Our Elders remind us that in order to know where we are going, we have to know where we have been. In the Canadian social work context that implies that as Indigenous social work educators and practitioners, we need to understand our personal histories and cultures and how the colonization of our lands has affected us as individuals, families and communities. It also requires us to have an understanding of the historical impact of colonialism in the contemporary social, political and economic contexts and to assess how these dynamics have influenced and are currently manifesting in the social work milieu. Further, given the mandate supplied by our Elders over fifty years ago when they articulated the need for Indigenous social workers to work with our people in culturally appropriate ways, it is our task to root ourselves in our traditional knowledges and cultures while simultaneously meeting the standards and rigour of mainstream social work education and practice. In terms of the social work profession more specifically, knowing where we have been includes understanding how the profession has interfaced with Indigenous people in Canada, how those encounters have been experienced by Indigenous people and how Indigenous people have responded to those interactions.

This book is a collection of writings by Indigenous social work academics across the country. It speaks to our collective past and illuminates, through the eyes of individuals from diverse nations, our understandings of our historical experiences as individuals and communities, how those experiences have shaped our individual paths, influence our current social work pedagogy and practice and inform our collective visions for a future in social work in ways that will meet the needs of the people we teach and for whom we engage in the helping field.

We are not alone in our endeavours and this collection does not emerge out of a vacuum. We draw upon the words of many Indigenous and allied academics who have gone before us and left beacons along the trail in the form of writings that have served to guide our thoughts and our work. We draw upon the support of all our relations who do the tough, emotionally challenging work on the social work front lines. We intend this book to be a resource for Indigenous and allied colleagues and perhaps as something upon which to build for the future generation of Indigenous educators and social workers. This work is a bridge between the past and the future.

The Past

> People become impatient with the repeated references by Aboriginal peoples to history and past injustices. "You cannot change the past," the argument goes. The point that is obviously missed is that the past is still with us in many ways and must be acknowledged in order to be accountable and responsible for the present and future. (Bruyere 1999: 177)

The encounter between Indigenous people and the social work profession in Canada has been controversial and tenuous at best. The early days of social work in Canada, framed by western philosophical influences and Judeo-Christian perspectives (Kreitzer 2006) within a postcolonial socio-political context, was an urban reform movement initiated by individuals intent on addressing poverty and child neglect. J.S. Woodsworth's push for a comprehensive social welfare program initiated formal social work training in 1915 (Wharf 1990). Indigenous people in Canada first encountered the social work profession as wards of the federal government through the Department of Indian Affairs. Social workers were tasked to accompany Indian agents onto reserves to remove children to residential schools and later, in the 1960s and 1970s, to apprehend children deemed to be in need of protection (Miller 1996; Fournier and Crey 1997). Until the mid-1960s, Indigenous people were under federal responsibility in social welfare matters. The Hawthorne Report (1966), which condemned the terrible conditions on reserves and encouraged the extension of provincial welfare services to reserves, led to tripartite agreements for social and child welfare services to First Nations communities. Perhaps because the federal government agreed to pay all costs associated with child welfare of Indigenous children, the decade of the 1960s saw exponential increases in all provinces of Indigenous children in care (McDonald and McDonald 2007). Many critics argue that the Indigenous child welfare era of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw so many children removed from families and communities, was another colonial project, following on the heels of the residential school project (Johnston 1983). Many Indigenous peoples' perceptions of the social work profession are skewed as a result of the assimilative policy projects of governments, which were furthered in practice by social workers. "Social Work has negative connotations to many Indigenous people and is often synonymous with the theft of children, the destruction of families, and the deliberate oppression of Aboriginal communities" (Sinclair 2004: 49).

A shift in consciousness took place in the 1960s with a social movement spearheaded by developments in human rights in Canada and spurred on by a number of key documents. Harold Cardinal's (1969) book, *The Unjust Society*, left little room for doubt that Indigenous people were acutely aware of how unfair their treatment was at the hands of federal and provincial governments. Shortly thereafter, in 1972, the national representative body for status Indigenous people in Canada, the Assembly of First Nations, published a report entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, which immediately influenced all fields of education and gave rise to Indigenous social work programs in Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1974 (Sinclair 2004). The first class of social work diploma graduates from the Saskatchewan Indian Federation College in 1974 symbolized the manifestation of the call by the Elders, made many years before, to teach Indigenous social workers in an educational context that would respect Indigenous traditions and culture and incorporate these into the social work curriculum. This pedagogical approach to the western social work "helping" system, which had not been very helpful to Indigenous people, would, they hoped, enable Indigenous people to address the terrible social ramifications of Indian policies in Canada.

The Present

Until relatively recently, those of us who have worked in the field have had to satisfy our need for Indigenous writings about social work by scouring the limited collection of journal articles and hoarding assorted unpublished reports and documents that had emerged over the decades out of Aboriginal social organizations. To a large extent, we have had to rely on mainstream articles and texts and make our individual adaptations to the material. The paucity of Indigenous authored publications to date is not the result of lack of skill to write papers, chapters or books. Rather, the reality of our collective experience as Aboriginal people in a colonial and racialized country has left us little time for the luxury of, first, graduate and post-graduate education and, second, teaching, research and writing. Teaching, research and writing are luxuries that have been superseded by personal, family and community trauma. None of the scholars who contributed to this collection, or their families, have escaped the effects of the *Indian Act* in its various oppressive manifestations, the residential school project and its intergenerational fall-out or the "Sixties Scoop" and the Aboriginal child welfare era. These assimilative colonial projects have left our families and social systems in disarray and contributed many obstacles and challenges for Indigenous social workers and aspiring Indigenous academics. The high demand and need for skilled Indigenous social workers in all areas of social work practice in Indigenous communities has led to tremendous pressure on individuals with a social work degree, while colonial fall-out and funding restrictions create almost impossible working contexts in some communities. Indigenous social workers with university credentials often find themselves having to be all things to all people.

At the time of compiling these works into a collection, there was just one book about Indigenous social work in Canada, Michael Hart's (2002) *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin*, although there is a small collection of writings from the 1980s and early 1990s that have served and guided the growing cadre of Indigenous social work academics well. Several of these bear mentioning: Castellano, Stalwick and Wien's (1986) article "Native Social Work in Canada" was the first to assert that social work education for Indigenous people be grounded in Indigenous culture and that the community contexts of students be considered in program delivery. Morrissette, McKenzie and Morrisette's (1993) article "Towards an Aboriginal Model of Social Work Practice" also discussed the concept of infusing Indigenous worldviews into social work practice and introduced the importance of understanding colonization for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This article is particularly interesting for their introduction of a continuum for individual identification with Aboriginal culture — a valuable concept in light of increasing urbanization of Aboriginal people as well as the de-culturing impacts of the residential school and child welfare systems for generations of Aboriginal people. Bruyere's riveting (1999) article "The Decolonization Wheel" articulates the insidiousness of colonialism as it plays out in contemporary society. Bruyere draws upon and critiques Fanon's decolonization framework and his key message resonates today: decolonization is not just an activity for Aboriginal people; it must be embraced by all social workers in order to tackle prevailing inequities and "isms" (1999: 178). Lastly, key writings from allied non-Aboriginal social workers have also been profoundly influential. Borg, Brownlee and Delaney's (1995) chapter "Postmodern Social Work Practice with Aboriginal People" calls upon social workers to adopt a postmodern perspective that criticizes systems of power and inequality as an avenue for genuine empowerment where allies support, but do not lead, Aboriginal people. They assert: "The ideal outcome of a postmodern social work model would be Aboriginal people as a unified people advocating for themselves… co-constructing their presents and/or futures with the assistance of the social work profession" (130).

This brief list is by no means complete and we are in the fortunate position of seeing the literature expanding in the last decade, giving us a foundation upon which to draw and grow our ideas. Many Indigenous authors and allies have contributed to our understanding in deep and meaningful ways (see, for example, Baskin 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2006; Cross 2000; Coleman, Unrau and Manyfingers 2001; Weaver 1997, 1998, 1999; Williams and Ellison 1996). A beneficial outcome of having an increasing supply of writing is that currently there are a good number of publications by Indigenous scholars articulating their experiences in social work pedagogy and practice, and the literature is more specific to social work specializations.

All of this writing and thinking has led us to formulations of an Indigenous-centred social work. I previously attempted a definition of Aboriginal social work that adequately summarizes the present direction of our collective efforts:

> Aboriginal social work can be described as a practice that combines culturally relevant social work education and training, theoretical and practice knowledge derived from Aboriginal epistemology (ways of knowing) that draws liberally on western social work theory and practice methods, within a decolonizing context. A decolonizing context is one which addresses the intergenerational and current impacts of colonization as manifested through colonial cultural and social suppression, intrusive and controlling legislation, industrial and residential school systems, the child welfare system, and institutional/systemic/individual racism and discrimination. Cultural relevance is manifested when practice and pedagogy mirror and support Indigenous and other ways of knowing, being, and doing. (Sinclair 2004: 76)

This definition will certainly evolve, but it still holds true, and the contributions in this collection elaborate on all the elements in this definition: social work education and training, decolonization and Aboriginal epistemology.

The Future

Recently, a colleague from Kanawake asked me, "Raven, what do you think about all this theory stuff?" My response was cautious. I said, "Makwa (not his real name), I think that in order to critique theory and its influences upon us as Indigenous educators, we need to know all about it." In our conversation I mentioned to him Sandy Grande's (2004) call for our collective engagement with mainstream theory in order to move Indigenous educators away from the "Native theory of anti-theory," which serves to limit our abilities towards political solidarity (2). Makwa and I agreed with Grande's conceptualization that engagement in abstract theory, given our collective urgency to attend to the practicalities of colonial turmoil, might have, until recently, seemed like a luxury for the academic elite. Our discussion revolved around the possibilities for learning that would come with developing deep understandings of the great non-Indigenous historical and contemporary philosophers, despite the fact that those writings are Eurocentric and, as Grande points out, often antithetical to the aims of Indigenous education.

The call to theory is an important one that Grande defines as "critique-al" work where engagement with critical and revolutionary theories might provide pathways to "spiritually vibrant, intellectually challenging, and politically operative schools for both Indian and non-Indian students" (3). St. Denis's (2007) discussion of anti-racism education in post-secondary institutions is one such example; she critiques identity and race theories to formulate a visionary approach to anti-racist education in the racialized Canadian context. Similarly, recent publications in Indigenous social work are indicating that Indigenous scholars are beginning to engage with the "dead White guys" (see, for example, Dumbrill and Green 2008; Hart Chapter 2) to provide new perspectives and foundations from which to approach social work theory, pedagogy and practice. There are many gems of wisdom to be found in dusty tomes that may resonate well with our perspectives:

> Constantly regard the universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul; and observe how all things have reference to one perception, the perception of this one living being; and how all things act with one movement; and how all things are the cooperating causes of all things which exist; observe too the continuous spinning of the thread and the structure of the web. (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*)

The contributions in this book provide a good overview of where we, as Indigenous educators, practitioners and students, have been and where we are going in Indigenous social work. In the spirit of our ancestors, we offer these perspectives and suggest that readers take what works, perhaps adding useful insights to your social work toolkits to be applied in your work in a good way. Build upon these ideas, offer suggestions and leave the rest.

Káhkíyáw Niwáhkómákánák — All My Relations