Interrogating settler social work with indigenous persons in Canada

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Abstract

• Summary: This article, towards decolonizing social work, reports on a study that examined the record of Canadian social work regarding Indigenous Canadians through the lens of the national professional association’s journal. Noting that the broad dataset of over 1,500 journal articles represents legitimized knowledge within the discipline, the study aimed to develop a history of the present to interrogate the discourses relating to such practice. The study involved an analysis of the contents over the life of the journal from 1932 to 2019.

• Findings: The study found that minimal attention was given to Indigenous issues in Canadian social work, only 30 articles touching on Indigenous issues directly. These articles portray contrasting discourses on Indigenous subjectivities and social work responses, reflecting conflicting perspectives in social work.

• Applications: These observations should inform the interrogation of contemporary social work practice in Canada regarding its positionality in relation to Indigenous persons. Further, it should contribute to forging social work’s future in recognizing the injustices and challenges accompanying its colonial history and present.

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Introduction
Social work has been a mechanism of historic and contemporary oppression of Indigenous people in Canada (Baskin, 2016; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004). Using moralizing and normalizing discourses, social work has advanced a state-sanctioned, settler colonialist agenda that has harmed Indigenous individuals, families, and communities over generations. In 2009, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) acknowledged social workers’ complicity particularly in the removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities and the associated dispossession and oppression they experienced. It further recognized that such negative professional practices should be discontinued (CASW, 2009). Subsequently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called for culturally meaningful responses and appropriate resourcing so as to significantly reduce the number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system.

Heeding these processes for resistance to and eradication of colonial practices in social work, this article explores Canadian professional social work discourse pertaining to practice with Indigenous Canadians. We examined the contents of the Canadian Social Work journal (formerly the Social Worker), the official journal of the CASW, to identify the social work community’s thinking over time. The emergent Foucauldian history of the present—discourse analysis that identifies historical and social forces and conditions that inform present-day practices—contributes to a critical understanding of contemporary social work practice and underlines the overdue need for a collective professional shift that recognizes the harms done. As non-Indigenous practitioners implicated in the settler social work narrative, this discourse analysis allows us to recognize the mechanisms by which social work perpetuates settler colonialism, deconstruct and take responsibility for the discipline’s complicity, as well as engage in social work decolonization. We are especially mindful of Indigenous peoples’ resilience and resistance. Our accountability extends to the language we use. We quote words such as “Aboriginal” or “native” in citations, while noting that “Indigenous” is currently the preferred term. By Indigenous, we are referring to Metis, Inuit and First Nations. We refer to Canada, though recognize that Turtle Island is the preferred term for many Indigenous persons.

Conceptual framework
We integrate Foucauldian notions of governmentality with the construct of settler colonialism to understand Canadian social workers historical and contemporary engagement with Indigenous communities. Offering an early presentation of Foucault’s ideas, Rabinow (1984) asserts that governmentality is the explicit and implicit governing and control of people to maintain order in society. Indeed,
governmentality operates through the disciplining mechanisms of normalization (the expectation of conventional behavior) and moralization (the sanctioning of inappropriate behavior). Governmentality also includes the implementation of legislation, policies and actions at all levels of government (rather than these instruments themselves); controls exercised by institutions, including professional controls; and self-governance as a reflection of the internalization of external controls (Foucault, 1994). The subjectivities created through such moralizing and normative discipline are a further facet of governmentality. Subjectivities reflect how individuals and groups are constructed through particular discourses (Foucault, 1997). Finally, an analysis of governmentality portrays how power is exercised over individuals and how it is used to discipline and manage their behavior (Rabinow, 1984).

We use the theoretical framework of settler colonialism to deepen notions of governmentality (Morgensen, 2011). Settler colonialism is an ongoing project of nation building by the settler group, functioning through the conquest, dispossession, displacement, and occlusion of Indigenous peoples, and thereby resulting in the assimilation, eradication, and active disconnection of Indigenous peoples from their lands and heritage (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Simpson, 2014; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006).

Foucault (1977) saw the “psy”-disciplines—which includes social work—as central in facilitating such governmentality, these professions surveilling and also disciplining families by punishing them for not adhering to dominant norms. The settler colonialism narrative similarly highlights the complicity of social work in dissembling families, community, and culture (Sinclair, 2016; Weaver, 2000). Social work has thus both assimilated and disciplined Indigenous bodies and is regularly employed to ensure conformity to the dominant status quo (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Shewell, 2018).

**Literature review**

In considering the scholarly literature, we first outline the mechanisms of governmentality through which dominant settler social work may reinforce the status quo. We then describe the Canadian policy context that legitimates invasive social work practices and review the position of Canadian social work in oppressive initiatives.

Following the extensive land theft and displacement of Indigenous persons legitimized by 1763 Royal Proclamation (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019), the 1876 Indian Act introduced coercive policies designed to further eradicate Indigenous persons, or alternatively eliminate their political identity through assimilation into Euro-Canadian society. Accordingly, residential schools, introduced 6 years later (the last only closing in 1996), aimed to “civilize, Christianize, and … erase Aboriginal identity by separating generations of the children from their families, suppressing their Aboriginal languages, and re-socializing them according to the norms of non-Aboriginal society” (Walmsley, 2005, p. 9). About 150,000 First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children attended these chronically underfunded facilities (Miller, 2020) that were characterized by inadequate care, abuse, and even the death of children. The consequences for children and their families were severe, resulting in significant intergenerational trauma (Alston-O’Connor, 2010;
Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2007, 2016). Initially, “The white social worker, following on the heels of the missionary, the priest and the Indian agent, was convinced that the only hope for the salvation of the Indian people lay in the removal of their children” (Sinclair, 2007, p. 66). Children’s Aid Societies ignored critiques of these institutions (Blackstock, 2009), while CASW and the Canadian Welfare Council (CWC) in 1946 claimed that “residential schools] have a place in a well-rounded system of Indian education” (Blackstock, 2009, p.29). Social workers cited “overcrowding and parental neglect or indifference” (RCAP, 1996, as cited in Walmsley, 2005, p. 11) as a rationale for removal. Twenty years later, the abovementioned Council argued for improvements to the residential schools’ system but not their closure, again casting Indigenous parents as fundamentally neglectful and thus unable to care for their children (Blackstock, 2009).

Informally, residential schools served as the Canadian government’s child welfare service for Indigenous persons until the 1950s (Walmsley, 2005). Regarding child welfare matters on reserve, the 1951 revision of the Indian Act shifted responsibility from Indian agents to provincial child welfare institutions. These amendments signaled the beginning of the Sixties Scoop period during which social workers facilitated the placement of 70% (20,000) of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children with predominantly non-Indigenous families (Sinclair, 2007; Walmsley, 2005). Social workers maintained that the apprehensions saved Indigenous children from poverty, poor housing, and malnutrition (McKenzie et al., 2016; Sinclair, 2004). The lack of social worker knowledge regarding Indigenous perspectives and their general failure to seek the consent of communities in the apprehension of children resulted in immense short- and longer-term harm to children, families, and communities (Blackstock, 2009; McKenzie et al., 2016). A social worker ironically observed that “[t]he welfare department which employed me was the biggest contributor to child abuse in the province” (Fournier & Crey, 1997, as cited by Sinclair, 2004, p.50). Later, the Kimelman Report deemed such forcible removal cultural genocide (Sinclair, 2007).

Beginning with the resistance to the 1969 White paper, Indigenous advocacy impacted child welfare policy. In the 1980s, an initial shift allowed bands and tribal councils to develop community-based child welfare services that recognized the significance of cultural identity and enabled them to place children with extended family or Indigenous non-kin rather than non-Indigenous families (Walmsley, 2005). A 1990 federal government initiative additionally enabled local bands to administer child and family services according to provincial and territorial legislation, though they were hampered by constraints associated with being delegated child welfare agencies (Mandell et al., 2003). As of June 2019, Bill C-92 affirms Indigenous communities’ right to enforce their own rules around child and family services. These policies pertain to federal jurisdiction of reserves, thus overlooking the significant numbers of Indigenous families now in urban areas.

Despite changes, Indigenous families and communities are still portrayed as dangerous to their children, rationalizing further removal (McKenzie et al., 2016; Sinha et al., 2013). Thus, as residential schools morphed into the “Sixties Scoop” (Blackstock, 2007), the latter merely seems to have evolved into the “Millennium Scoop” (Gilchrist cited by Sinclair, 2007). Indeed, the continued removal of Indigenous children and
their overrepresentation in child welfare systems remains an ongoing concern (Baskin, 2016; Blackstock et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2007; Sinha et al., 2013). First Nations families are disproportionately investigated and their children significantly overrepresented in care, numbers currently far exceeding the peak enrolment of children in residential schools (Blackstock et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2016; Sinha et al., 2013). The primary reason for child welfare intervention remains neglect, suggesting that structural risk factors, such as poverty, substandard housing, inequities in educational, health and social service provision, lack of food security and social exclusion, are being inadequately addressed (Blackstock, 2007). Moreover, the risk management orientation in child welfare practice perpetuates Eurocentric norms that fail to recognize socio-cultural, historical, and local community contexts (McKenzie et al., 2016) and ignore both holistic Indigenous views of wellness and their relational understandings of family and community (Baskin, 2016; Mandell et al., 2003).

These social work practices have resulted in the separation of families, dislocation from communities and culture, and a loss of identity for many (Alston-O’Connor, 2010; Baskin, 2016; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2007, 2016). Social work has not only been complicit in child welfare but is, for example, also active in the correctional and mental health systems where Indigenous persons are overrepresented and treated problematically (Leeuw et al., 2010; McKay, 2018).

Thus, social work has had a conflictual relationship with Indigenous communities, having disciplined families, fulfilled colonizing and assimilative national agendas, intentionally overlooked Indigenous cultural and familial practices, dismissed structural contributors, and ignored the harm caused by both the removal and placement outside of the family and the community (Baskin, 2006; Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004). This quote evocatively captures the positionality of social work: “I cannot recollect ever hearing a story of a social worker who came in during a time of need and used advocacy or activism skills to make a positive difference” (Weaver, 2000, p. 14). Social workers should accordingly stop justifying their behaviors and must “deconstruct our past reality in a way that makes obvious the thinking that fuels colonization” (Blackstock, 2009, pp. 34–35).

**Methodology**

**Study purpose**

CASW published Canadian Social Work as a forum for Canadian social workers to share practice knowledge, research, and skills; debate contemporary social work concerns; and share information about social work educational resources (Novik & Schmidt, 2018). Professional journals embody views deemed to be relevant, acceptable, and noteworthy to the discipline and hence are archives of received and accepted knowledge (Yu, 2019). Taking this into account and noting that progressive social work demands accountability and intentional processes of decolonization (Chapman & Withers, 2019), this study attempts to interrogate social work professional discourse about practice with Indigenous persons as depicted in Canadian Social Work from its inception in 1932 to its conclusion in 2019. This span of almost nine decades offers a unique perspective of
mainstream, Canadian social work. This analysis also complements Yu’s (2019) study which investigated the representation in the *Australian Social Work* journal of the Stolen Generations in Australia and problematized the role of social work in various contexts of colonization.

This study uses a history of the present, a qualitative and nuanced methodology that captures narratives as expressed in “discourse.” Discourses, reflected in both oral and written text, shape the world while also reflecting how issues are conceptualized or constructed. Discourses may portray dominant society and broader social issues, as well as marginal, disempowered voices. Discourses can be strengthened (e.g., through supporting discourses or reinforcement by dominant groups), weakened (e.g., by competing discourses, lack of resources, shifting political environments), and resisted (e.g., by challenging their veracity, offering alternative discourses) (Schmid, 2010).

Archaeology and genealogy together create a history of the present through non-linear, layered, critical historical enquiry and reflection (Rabinow, 1984). Indeed, Wolfe’s (2006) theorization of settler colonialism as “a structure, not an event” emphasizes that historical processes are reinforced and perpetuated in contemporary issues.

Archaeology identifies the prevailing dominant, marginalized, or silent discourses and their associated voices (Rabinow, 1984), highlights the elements of a discourse, and examines their construction (Skehill, 2007). We thus excavated both major and minor (counter) discourses. We attended to subordinate discourses by authors identifying as Indigenous. Further, we used archaeology to lift out the subjectivities constructed by a discourse. We employed genealogy to explore the relationship of discursive elements in and over time, avoid binaries, and focus on the mechanisms that maintain or unsettle discourses. Genealogy also pointed us to the ways in which discourses may intersect and the meaning of such intersection (Schmid, 2010).

For our profession, developing a history of the present is “a critical and effective methodology for problematizing the nature and form of social work in the present by recourse to its past” (Skehill, 2007, p. 449). The history of the present we develop names the historical and contemporary discourses related to social work and Indigenous persons in Canada and begins to identify what has allowed these to be sustained, interrupted, or disrupted. In particular, we aim to understand the ways in which settler colonialism may be reflected in social work processes with Indigenous communities over time.

**Data collection and analysis**

To examine the social work community’s thinking on practice with Indigenous families and communities, relevant records were sought in the *Canadian Social Work* journal. Having access to the full collection of over 1,500 articles allowed us to track the discourses and associated shifts over the life of the journal. Because the journal was digitized only in 2004, we manually identified pertinent articles, using the titles and first paragraphs of the articles. The search terms “Indigenous,” “Aboriginal,” “Native,” “Indian,” “Inuit,” “Metis,” “Colonization,” “Residential Schools,” and “Child Welfare” allowed us to select substantive articles and editorials, though the 35 that referenced only child welfare and not Indigenous issues were rejected. Of the remaining 75, 45
were deselected because the mention of Indigenous persons was cursory. Because this study focused on publicly available materials and was restricted to discourse analysis, no ethical approval was required.

The relevant articles were then examined further to identify primary discourses and constructed subjectivities (archaeology) and reveal the relationship among Canadian social work professional discourses (genealogy). Noting that the articles and the discourses highlighted within each constitute the artifacts considered, the authors are not cited in the textual references made. However, we rely extensively on quotes to reflect author voice and tenor.

**Findings: archaeology**

The discourse analysis revealed that Indigenous issues were seldom discussed in the journal, with only 30 entries specifically discussing social work practice with Indigenous persons. Collectively reflecting social work involvement across various fields, of these, 15 articles discussed general provision of services; eight, child welfare; two, disability; one, violence against women; one, youth in criminal justice; and three were briefs/reports prepared by CASW. The relevant articles were assigned numbers, A[number] indicating an article in the list.

Four core discourses emerged. These are discussed in the two subsections below, the first around Indigenous subjectivities and the second focusing on social work intervention with Indigenous persons. Our analysis suggests that the emergent themes intersect with particular periods, the articles forming one cluster of ten articles falling broadly between 1932 and 1960, the other 20 articles between 1976 and 2019. There was a peculiar silence from 1960 to 1976.

**Indigenous subjectivities**

The discourses on Indigenous subjectivities embedded in the very few selected articles include, first, the view that Indigenous peoples suffered from inherent cultural deficits and second, that they were saddled with the legacies of colonization and an unjust social order.

**Inherent cultural deficit.** A first and prevalent discourse that emerged over the initial four decades of the journal centered on the unworthiness of the Indigenous person, blaming cultural traits for their lack of societal success. Indigenous persons were repeatedly objectified, dehumanized, and depicted as uncivilized, inadequate, and inherently deficient. They were othered through processes of devaluation, demonization, exoticization, and idealization (Dei, 2002). For example, a social worker’s report in 1940 on a home visit to a “chieftain’s daughter” contrasts their own “usual tactful questions in our best social work manner” with a caricature of someone who is untidy, ungodly, and irresponsible (A1). Another 1940 article that aimed to set Metis as better than other Indigenous peoples nevertheless concludes that “They represent the mingling and the conflict of two cultures with often tragic results … Their living standards are notoriously low and
immorality quotient notoriously high” (A2). A 1947 article presents Indigenous persons as having unchanneled “surplus energy”; “rapidly developing into juvenile delinquents”; and having “substandard hygiene and childcare,” an “unhealthy diet” and a “nomadic existence” (A3). While on the one hand devaluing Indigenous persons, this author also idealizes the “Eskimos” they met, praising how “civilized” they were, but in their surprise suggesting this is not to be expected (A3). In a subsequent 1960 article, Indigenous persons are depicted as inferior to settlers because they lacked basic life skills such as “concrete information about various occupations of life … [to] dispatch … personal or social responsibilities” (A8). They are infantilized, this worker suggesting, “So many other elements of our culture that non-Indian children acquire unconsciously simply by growing up are lacking in the Indian’s ‘Integration Kit’” (A8).

The discourse of Indigenous ways as inferior to those of settlers emerges later also, even if the language is less objectifying. For example, in a 1976 article, an author examining the role perceptions of “Eskimo” welfare workers notes “[T]he indigenous non-professional’s tendency to see problems as having quick and simple solutions, in spite of the need for long term casework” and “the difference between the white middle class deferred gratification pattern and the Eskimo (and white lower class) expectation of fairly immediate reward, is certainly another contributing factor to the difficulty in accepting prolonged training” (A10).

Thus, the Indigenous person is seen as less valuable precisely because of their indigeneity. The othering discourse consistently highlights difference(s) between the “civilized” social worker and the inadequate Indigenous person and is legitimized by the dominant assimilation discourse advanced by the Indian Act.

In the same way that inferior culture is cited as the reason for non-normative behavior, Indigenous failure is also portrayed as emerging out of their life circumstances, for which in circular logic, they are responsible. For example, in a 1947 CASW and CWC submission, Indigenous individuals are referred to as “a race of slum-dwellers” judged for “the extent of dilapidation, sanitary arrangements, household equipment, living accessories, and overcrowding” that are “appreciably worse than that of adjacent white communities” (A3). The authors also highlight Indigenous persons’ high rates and “special racial susceptibility to tuberculosis,” as “a disease of poverty spread by ignorance” (A3). This othering exemplifies how social workers promoted colonial assimilation, hence becoming “a foundational component to the creation, expansion, and adaptation of the settler state” (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019, p. 437).

Product of external social conditions. A different discourse emerges in later years. It suggests that social conditions/life circumstances cause Indigenous people’s challenges. For example, a 1993 article affirms the role of structural factors and lived experience by stressing that “[m]any Native northerners who are attracted to the prospect of social services work have been victimized in their own lives and require healing … Issues such as addictions, family violence, sexual abuse, and child welfare are not simply abstract course-content areas; many … have immediate experience as victims” (A17).

The discourse evolves further from assuming reified social conditions to speaking about the active role of historic and contemporary colonization in creating the
environment in which Indigenous persons must survive. An Indigenous author first tables this discourse and the associated subjectivities in 1994 stating that,

[W]hat we had become, resulted from being taught shame … for being Indian, … a happy, energetic child, and silenced from laughing, crying, and singing. Our humanness was stolen at a very early age and we were made to feel like worthless human beings (A21).

Similarly, a 2003 article speaks of colonization as “a disease” and recognizes the challenges faced by Indigenous youth that attended residential schools:

Aboriginal children … run the gauntlet of decision making from birth to adulthood, without the benefit of identity … forced to operate without the proverbial safety net. Their feelings of alienation frequently led to depression, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and suicide. Without the benefit of healthy, fulfilled members, communities lost important resources and cultural continuity. Children returning … after years of absence, encountered cultural conflicts, language barriers and a feeling of isolation (A24).

Two Indigenous authors in 2005 and 2018 echo these sentiments, noting the impact of the oppression/s experienced. For example, they list as outcomes the “lack of social cohesion, social exclusion, political exclusion or disinterest,” “decreased economic capacity and cultural suppression,” and “mental health challenges, substance misuse, and cycles of abuse and violence.” (A30) These seem, in turn, to create further difficulties such as “cultural detachment,” community immobilization and hopelessness, along with “internalized oppression, invisibility or passing, lateral violence and low self-esteem,” as well as “high suicide rates in some communities” (A26).

Thus, in this discourse, Indigenous persons are not seen as the problem—rather the social conditions brought forth by the antecedent colonization are the issue. Even so, a deficit focus is maintained. A 2005 author’s comment that touts Indigenous youths’ “abundant strength, resiliency and ability to succeed and emerge as leaders of the future” (A25) presents as a marked exception.

Therefore, both discourses highlighting Indigenous persons’ subjectivities cast them as vulnerable, whether as products of a deficient culture or of negative social conditions and colonization. The survival, resilience, and resistance of Indigenous persons in the face of the settler society’s dominance and its goal of eradication or assimilation are largely overlooked. Also, the authors of the reviewed articles generally do not seem cognizant of nor interrogate their role as social workers in constructing these subjectivities. As highlighted in the following discourses, a focus on vulnerability instead offers the rationale for social work intervention, these discourses thus reinforcing each other.

**Social work as professional responsibility**

While the reflected discourses agree that social work intervention is a professional responsibility, there are opposing discourses around the substance of such intervention—perhaps reflecting the contrasting views of Indigenous subjectivities discussed
above. The professional responsibility of social workers towards Indigenous persons is, on the one hand, seen as a civilizing mechanism helping Indigenous persons conform to dominant society and, on the other, as an emancipatory discourse built around human rights, ethical cultural practice, solidarity with Indigenous peoples, and decolonization.

**Social work intervention as moral improvement.** The helping discourse in social work around moral imperatives and the advancement of self-sufficiency (Chapman & Withers, 2019) echoes the assimilationist discourse that directed settlers to help Indigenous persons towards becoming contributing citizens (Veracini, 2010). For example, a 1947 article notes that,

> We, as Canadian people, have a responsibility in the North that must not be ignored. The Natives there are residents of Canada and … should not only share in our common heritage but be enabled to take ever-increasing responsibilities, finally becoming Canadian citizens, subject to special controls and requiring no special privileges (A2).

This quote re-casts conquest and coercion as benevolent (Alfred, 2009; Wolfe, 2006), thereby disregarding Indigenous peoplehood and instead requiring submission and subscription to settler values and principles (Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2014). Echoing this motif, a 1947 CASW and CWC brief focuses on the moral improvement of Indigenous persons “[to] render them capable of benefiting from education or mobilizing their energies to deal effectively with their day-to-day problems … and of carrying on productive economic activity” (A3). In promoting capitalism, Indigenous persons are to be disconnected from land, language, history, and culture (Cardinal, 1999; Simpson, 2014). Similarly, a decade later, an article outlines the social work task as “preparing Indians to achieve the goal of integration by their own efforts” (A5). These sentiments reflect the liberal democratic goal of promoting self-reliant “civilization” that relieves the settler state of its responsibilities to Indigenous persons (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). This theme is also evident in a 1960 article that suggests:

> Young Indian rehabilitants who ‘belong’ in the old culture but who want to live in the new often … need … instruction to gain the trappings of our civilization … [and] also [must be] helped to change whatever traits or attitudes they have that would interfere with their success in life in our non-Indian communities (A8).

Further, this discourse requires that Indigenous individuals be willing participants. A 1949 article reframes social work intervention aimed at assimilation as a benign choice arguing the “recognition of the right, if he so desires … to be assimilated into the white community” (A4). A 1951 article suggests that social work is there to “help the Indian achieve his ambition … He wants to contribute something to the community and the national life” (A5). As later confirmed by the Red Paper (Cardinal, 1999), these social work discourses perpetuate the original enfranchisement discourse of the Indian Act by emphasizing self-determination and choice and are used to erase the Indigenous person/s and integrate them into dominant culture.
Social workers and their professional expertise are centered in the discourse. A 1947 brief notes that “thoroughly qualified staff of welfare specialists at headquarters … [and] a trained social worker … on the staff of each Indian agency” were required (A3). A 1951 article speaks of “The professional approach … adopted by the Indian Affairs Branch” (A5) and in 1960 the necessity of “special help” (A8) that only social workers could provide is identified. In being the expert, the social worker can claim universalized professional knowledge that prevents them being personally responsible for their interventions and allows them to securely perform the settler colonizing role required by Indian Affairs (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019).

This discourse of social work as moral improvement is emblematic of past discourse. Even so, it continues into the present being informed by the professional imperative “to improve people who are different” (Chapman & Withers, 2019, p.163), which overlooks systemic issues. Further, this discourse reveals social work’s adherence to colonizers’ moral superiority, interpreting Indigenous experience and knowledge through a settler colonial worldview as the only recognized discourse. The discourse also focuses on moralization and normalization as key techniques in facilitating Indigenous invisibility.

Social work as the recognition of culture, human rights, decolonization, and indigenization. In contrast to the discourse of social work responsibility for the moral advancement of Indigenous people, alternative conceptions of social work draw upon antioppressive and anticolonial discourses that recognize social work complicity in the colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples. These discourses emphasize the need for decolonization as well as respect for cultural differences while attending to the human rights of Indigenous groups.

In 1960, the first article to problematize so-called ‘civilizing’ practice and thus attribute harm to the practice of social work through the oppression and marginalization of Indigenous peoples argues that,

In the North … many changes are being imposed on the Eskimo and his way of life … by ‘western civilization’ … If we admit that the Eskimo … [has] integrity, with a thought and value world all his own, then we … admit … that there is resistance … and resentment (A8).

This article calls for the social workers’ “[a]cceptance and non-judgmental attitude … [towards] values and customs … different from … his own cultural experience and understanding” (A8).

A 1976 article notes the “human cost to [Northern] native people” because of social workers’ inaction in addressing systemic issues and them not offering more than “lip service to ‘preventative’ social work and social policies” (A11). The author questions the individualizing of challenges as well as remedial responses:

It does little good to tell a person consuming too much alcohol that he or she should find more constructive recreational outlets or get a meaningful job and support the family or go back to school for further education when [these opportunities do not exist] (A11).
The author questions the privileging of individual change interventions over systemic change.

The harms discourse is later associated with cultural transgression and an assimilationist agenda. A 1981 article noted the “ideological preoccupation” amongst child welfare workers’ with “blaming the victim” as part of the “[s]olutions … designed to assimilate native people into the mainstream … [that] fail to recognize the underlying [capitalist] causes of native dependency” (A12). Two further articles in this decade focus on culturally biased child welfare decisions and advocate for more robust Native Child and Family service provision. A 1988 article castigates “non-Indian” social workers for having “cultural blinders and … genocidal convictions,” “culturally selective perceptions,” and “cultural tunnel vision” (A15).

An accompanying discourse to that of social work harm towards Indigenous peoples is that of human rights. A 1993 article suggests that social workers address “a gaping hole in the social safety net for the population of disabled natives on reserves … [that undermines] the right to accessible resources for disabled people in Canada’s Native communities” (A20), while an 1994 article stresses that “[T]he human rights situation of Aboriginal women in violent homes, particularly those who live on reserve and have no legal claim to their matrimonial homes, is unacceptable under Canadian law and arguable under international law” (A21).

A further iteration of the harms discourse highlights social work complicity in colonization. The 1993 editorial to the special issue of Indigenous practice notes that,

Social work symbolizes, for many First Nation persons, the historical legacy of colonization —the disempowerment, dependence, and destruction that resulted from the previous waves of state intrusion into community and family life … Social work’s legacy … [is] part of the problem more frequently than as part of the solution (A16).

Recommendations from this special issue for the profession’s decolonization include promoting Indigenous leadership and service delivery, culturally relevant interventions and Indigenization. The 1993 CASW brief submitted to the Royal Commission admits that “social work practice within Aboriginal cultures does demand fundamental change … and is not simply … reform” (A19). These decolonizing and indigenizing practices are again discussed in the new millennium. A 2005 article advocates for “a more community-based and preventive model” that includes traditional Indigenous “concepts of justice for their youth” (A25). One 2016 article describes a parenting program based on “Aboriginal” teachings (A29) while another challenges the western discourse of productivity as employability by describing Nuu-chah-nulth traditional perspectives (A28).

The language around colonization becomes more direct over time. In 2018, an Indigenous author points out the “oversurveillance of Indigenous peoples by … social work” (A30) and connects oppressive social work practices with Indigenous persons to colonial and neo-colonial attitudes, approaches, and structures: “[W]hen non-Indigenous social workers work with Indigenous people … [t]he role that worldviews and cultures play in the identification of problems, their causes, and possible solutions, is often disregarded … [and] the realities of racism and colonization [are ignored]” (A30). The author requires social
workers to resist being “part of a collective where systemic oppression and marginalization are produced and maintained” (A30). Recommendations for “decolonizing by indigenizing” (A30) involve first, “privileging Indigenous voices in the transmission of their approaches and practices to helping,” (A30), and second, inclusion of Indigenous content in social work education. It is also suggested that service provision for Indigenous persons should be informed by Indigenous worldviews and approaches for helping and developed with Indigenous leadership.

These interlocking though distinct subdiscourses do not each carry the same weight regarding social work responsibility. Although important, the shift from civilizing to cultural sensitivity and human rights does not require social workers to investigate their positionality, allowing them instead to maintain a savior discourse, the position of innocence, and moral superiority (Blackstock, 2009; Chapman & Withers, 2019) and to continue pathologizing the marginalized group. Another concern is that although some of the more recent journal articles recognize Indigenous worldviews, knowledges, values, and practices, few of these were authored by (identified) Indigenous persons, thus suggesting the continued centrality of non-Indigenous social workers and their expertise. Also at issue is that a universal human rights lens overlooks Indigenous rights to autonomy (Corntassel, 2012). Finally, Indigenous knowledge is typically applied to individual/micro practice while service delivery is generally tied to mainstream goals and objectives rather than social transformation. Except for the few direct discussions of colonization, these discourses together only scratch the surface of the “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 1998, p.17) exercised by social work towards Indigenous persons. Shewell (2018) (a non-Indigenous social work educator) underlines that social workers continue as “primary agents of a settler society bent on the social and cultural destruction of Indigenous persons” (p.30).

In summary, there are competing discourses around social work practice with Indigenous peoples, one marked by an individualist perspective that emphasizes the task of moral upliftment of Indigenous peoples, the other acknowledging social work harm and complicity in colonization. In both cases, however, the position of non-Indigenous social workers largely stands unexamined.

**Discussion: genealogy**

We now explore the relationships between the four emergent discourses discussed in the findings to establish their meaning. To begin, Indigenous persons are constructed as inadequate and naïve. These deficiencies are attributed directly to Indigenous culture, which is cast as inferior and contrasted with the expertise and knowledge of social workers and their middle class, White, settler, “civilized” perspectives. In some cases, individual failures and poor living conditions are viewed as mutually reinforcing, thus occluding the role of systemic factors. This discourse around inherent deficits stands in contrast to those that provide structural explanations to the challenges which Indigenous peoples experience. Such discourse interprets individual difficulties as a consequence of social conditions and not as problems inherent in Indigenous persons themselves. These primary discourses thus create distinct Indigenous subjectivities that underline
individualistic approaches. The two other core discourses speak to practitioners’ responsibility in social work with Indigenous persons. A prevalent discourse points to the advancement of the moral integrity of Indigenous persons as a key social work imperative, thereby echoing the colonial assimilationist agenda. A counter discourse argues for the need of social workers to interrogate their complicity in colonizing practice and the potential harm resulting from this. This requires engagement that instead advances Indigenous rights, culturally meaningful responses, and Indigenous leadership.

What can one infer from these different emergent discourses? First, retrogressive discourses are resisted through the development of more progressive discourses. The former discourses represent a strong disciplinary narrative where the social worker promotes the individual rather than the community as the point of intervention, advances governmentality through normalization and moralization (Skehill, 2007), and legitimates such action through their expertise (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). In contrast, the progressive discourses are informed by social justice and transformation themes placing emphasis on the human rights of Indigenous persons and communities as a basis for intervention. However, these discourses may not sufficiently unsettle the disciplinary narrative in that, for example, human rights are seen as universal or social conditions are not understood through a structural lens of oppression and settler colonialism.

Second, these discourses appear to be reflective of broader societal discourses and are reinforced by these. While these four discourses are interwoven throughout the journal’s history, articles from earlier decades are particularly blatant in their disregard of Indigenous worth and in stressing the social worker’s responsibility for rescuing Indigenous persons from themselves. As such, the colonizing project, which portrayed Indigenous persons as dependent and deficient (Veracini, 2010), is echoed in the othering discourses and then intersects with and strengthens the social work imperative of moral improvement and self-sufficiency (Chapman & Withers, 2019). This discourse is also underlined by other societal trends, with Baskin (2006) asserting that the 1930 to 1970’s were marked by multiple economic, political, cultural, and epistemic injustices that aimed to replace Indigenous worldviews with those of dominant society. Social workers legitimized such interventions with claims of professional expertise and benevolent intentions.

Moreover, this discourse of blame and individual responsibility persists and more recently mirrors and is strengthened by neoliberal discourse emphasizing individual responsibility (Singh & Cowden, 2015). A 1998 article presents the sixties and seventies as a time of expansion of the welfare state recalling the “heady days in which social workers played key roles in developing new programs” and “halcyon period to which we should and can return.” The absence of any professional discussion on practice with Indigenous peoples during the Sixties Scoop is remarkable, reinforcing the notions of complicity raised in the literature (Blackstock, 2009). It suggests that the profession, at least from the perspective of accepted and legitimized knowledge, sees nothing problematic about the removals and perhaps saw such extensive intervention as innovative.

The later decades did see a “shift from overt civilizing discourses to more neutralized language” (McKenzie et al., 2016, p. 10). This accompanies attention to the role of
cultural values in social work practice and consideration of the profession’s own hand in initiating and perpetuating harm and sustaining colonial violence. In 1993, five articles published in the Special Issue on Social Work Practice with Indigenous peoples mark an unusual peak and, according to the editorial, signify a “small but growing interest among social workers in Canada … on their practice with First Nation peoples.” It is seen as foreshadowing changes in social work practice with Indigenous persons and a sign “that the future of social work profession can be different from the past.” However, this expected interruption of the past discourse has not developed as consistently as hoped.

What then is the history of the present that emerged from an examination of the contents of the journal? Although a secondary discourse around the critique of the complicity of social workers in colonization efforts emerges, historical wrongdoing is typically not problematized. Moreover, while the harm social workers cause in adopting individualized, culturally damaging initiatives may be acknowledged, critiques are often not couched in the language of oppression and the perpetuation of colonization. Such efforts also fall short of demonstrating steps towards decolonization, such as the development of critical consciousness and reconstructing power, hierarchies, and knowledge (Veracini, 2010). Contemporary oppression tends to remain invisible. Indeed, the ways in which residential schools, the Sixties Scoop and the Millennium Scoop replicate each other (Blackstock, 2007) and the persistence of the moral imperative discourse are overlooked. Thus, social work chooses to position itself primarily as an agent of governmentality rather than as a change agent.

More recent articles reflect a discursive move from the social worker as a distant savior to being an engaged ally. A further relational shift from benevolent helping interventions to professional acknowledgement of complicity in violence is also evident. Over time, progressive discourses that challenge historical and contemporary oppressions have become more acceptable. There is additionally the recognition of the need to integrate Indigenous knowledges in mainstream social work practice. Accordingly, the journal’s more recent articles suggest an awareness of Canadian social work complicity in the removals of Indigenous children.

Despite both the burgeoning of Indigenous scholarship over the last three decades and a succession of reports that highlight concerns (such as the 1985 Kimelman report, the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, the 2000 First Nations Child and Family Services Joint National Policy Review, the 2005 Wen:De: We are Coming to the Light of Day, the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, the 2016 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling, and the 2019 Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women report), social work is still struggling to become a mechanism for social transformation. This may be attributable to settler colonial cultural superiority (Alfred, 2009). Veracini (2010) argues that settler colonialists, in legitimizing their presence, must disavow the full extent of the injury they caused, and it appears that social work as a discipline is struggling to take full responsibility for historic as well as ongoing damage. The continuing normalization and moralization in which social work engages (Schmid, 2010) cannot be sustained if social workers admit to their role in causing harm. Indeed, the neoliberal environment within Canada, echoing earlier
settler colonial values of individual responsibility and choice, requires social workers to avoid social transformation objectives and holistic engagement in favor of individualized, case management approaches (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Shewell, 2018).

Limitations of the study

A key limitation relates to the extent to which this journal and its contents can be considered reflective of the social work landscape. We would agree that it is not. First, it is a journal dominated by English-language submissions (though the few French language articles were reviewed and only one pertinent article selected). Second, Canadian researchers can publish in other local and international social work journals. Third, work pertaining to Indigenous issues is interdisciplinary and much published work falls outside of the journal reviewed. Also, Indigenous researchers may have chosen to dissociate themselves from the journal or may have been silenced through the review process. Finally, this particular body of literature—the journal of the professional association—may have systematically excluded alternative and dissenting views published in other fora, including grey literature. However, the journal nevertheless presents the dominant professional voice, and it is for this reason that its contents were reviewed.

Conclusion

Our discussion reflects the discourses that create a history of the present of social work in Canada as reflected in the Canadian Social Work journal. Although professional rhetoric regarding practice with Indigenous persons may have shifted, the profession’s traditional association with settler white middle-class morality and thus with governmentality remains largely intact. The journal has, over most of its almost 90 years of publishing these articles, privileged certain discourses and reinforced a particular understanding of social work practice with Indigenous persons in Canada and, as such, has played a role in cultivating governmentality within the profession thus supporting particular discourses and subjectivities that need to be critically interrogated.

Similar issues emerged from the companion piece by Yu (2019) that problematized the role of social workers in the removal of Aboriginal children in Australia. His article also reinforces that social work practice discourses align with broader socio-political discourses and thereby legitimate one another. Further, Yu’s (2019) observation that key issues affecting the welfare and rights of Indigenous Australians were overlooked in the professional journal apply to the Canadian Social Work journal also.

While the dominant social work imperative pulls social workers towards the maintenance of the status quo, the competing liberatory and social justice mandate of social work requires social workers to critically interrogate the dominant discourses that inform the profession and recognize that “the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present” (Ahmed, as cited in Chapman & Withers, 2019, p.179). It also demands that social workers actively construct and implement relevant and meaningful practices with Indigenous individuals, families, and communities that are informed and led by Indigenous persons. Finally, it is incumbent on social work journals to resist supporting
normalization and moralization agendas, and to create space for alternative practices and knowledges.

Ethics
No ethical approval was required for the project because only public documents were analyzed.

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