

Here be Dragons! Breaking Down the Iron Cage for Aboriginal Children

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This chapter discusses critical and timely issues in First Nations and Métis (collectively referred to here as Aboriginal) child welfare that have emerged from the Making Our Hearts Sing (MOHS) research initiative in Alberta. From the outset, the MOHS initiative focussed on the stories of Aboriginal people as the source of wisdom that would inform the research process. The stories are rich with meaning and distinctive from many other approaches to research. The challenge has been to learn from joint efforts with Aboriginal communities to create, not only new insights, but also knowledge that can be readily applied to real world situations. MOHS sought to build collaboration among child welfare stakeholders and Aboriginal communities in order to create innovative, effective, and practical approaches to child welfare, which are more in keeping with traditional Aboriginal worldviews and which may contribute to reconciliation, healing, and increased community capacity. The MOHS initiative was a partnership of the Alberta Ministry of Children's Services, the University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work, the Blood Reserve, the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, the Prairie Child Welfare Consortium,

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and Region 10 (Métis Settlements) Child and Family Services Authority.

The questions guiding the study were:

- What are the historical effects of the residential school experience on the identity of Aboriginal children, families, and communities?
- How do these compare with the current effects of child welfare placement on the identity of Aboriginal children, families, and communities?
- How can key stakeholders collaborate to create effective and innovative child welfare program responses that are consistent with Aboriginal worldviews?
- How do we create respectful working relationships that can lead to reconciliation and enhanced collaboration?

RATIONALE FOR THE MOHS INITIATIVE

Understanding the Prevailing Western Paradigm

The rationale for the MOHS initiative begins with an understanding of the prevailing Western paradigm for social organization. Max Weber is considered by many as the father of modern bureaucracy, but he was also a scholar of bureaucracy with deep concerns about such systems. Weber cautioned against creating a "polar night of icy darkness," in which a highly rational and bureaucratically organized social order traps people in an "iron cage." He feared the effects of this iron cage on human choice and identity, stating that "Perhaps it will so determine [the lives of all individuals] until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt" (as cited in Grosak, 2006, p. 21). Weber lived and wrote in Germany 100 years ago, but it seems that he was almost prophetic in his anticipation of some elements of modern social order. He is referred to here because some of his predictions appear to have been realized, and many of the structures that constrain modern people have elements of this iron cage: rigid procedures and structures that stifle creativity and reduce community. The ultimate objective of the MOHS initiative was to create an opportunity for conversation

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and understanding, and to help free us from the increasingly tight boundaries of this cage.

Such an opportunity seems especially important at a time when Aboriginal people are seeking to return to more holistic values at the interpersonal, ecological, and spiritual levels. For child welfare, in particular, such values stand in direct contrast to prevailing models of practice, which are usually based upon relatively recent Western paradigms that have greatly contributed to the development of modern civilization. The child welfare agencies formed in the 20th century inevitably reflected these prevailing paradigms as the most efficient ways to organize work, becoming part of what Morgan (1986) described as an inevitable societal movement toward increased mechanization, specialization, and bureaucratization. Thus, it is not particularly surprising that child welfare systems adopted bureaucratic practices, and continue to do so.

These practices have numerous benefits, but they also have a downside when it comes to human services, especially in Aboriginal communities that are rooted in different value systems. In the absence of any other familiar models, and because of the constraints imposed by those who fund and make policy for child welfare services, Aboriginal communities have been forced into a paradigm alien to their beliefs and values. This has resulted in child welfare services that involve large numbers of Aboriginal families and children but show poor outcomes (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005).

Modern child welfare services are, for the most part, hierarchical, increasingly specialized, and often procedurally bound. This can result in service models that look for pathology rather than strength, and that seek to maintain the status quo rather than structural change. There is a need to counter this tendency by creating more forums in which service recipients, service providers, policy makers, and academics can challenge and support each other to create more responsive services. The MOHS initiative has attempted to do this, and is discovering signs of hope in the Aboriginal communities who are engaged in a healing process. Youth are being asked to contribute to their communities and to help other youth. Clients and front-line social workers are beginning to be heard. Most importantly, the Elders are increasingly recognized as an important source of wisdom and experience.

Important changes are taking place in Aboriginal communities, changes that must be attended to and carefully nurtured, as they may hold the key for improvement of all of child welfare services. We must also be mindful that in spite of the best intentions of Aboriginal communities, there are forces at play that work against their interests—some overt, some subtle, and others so deeply engrained in our psyche that we are barely conscious of their presence.

Understanding the Aboriginal Worldview

The discussion here begins with an ancient prophecy that brings to life our thinking, as related by planet biologist Sahtouris (1992):

Within the ancient Hopi Indian Prophecy is told the history of the Red and White brothers, sons of the Earth Mother and the Great Spirit who gave them different missions. The Red Brother was to stay at home and keep the land in sacred trust while the White Brother went abroad to record things and make inventions. One day the White Brother was to return and share his inventions in a spirit of respect for the wisdom his Red Brother had gained. It was told that his inventions would include *cobwebs* through which people could speak to each other from house to house across mountains, even with all doors and windows closed; there would be carriages crossing the sky on *invisible* roads, and eventually a gourd of ashes that when dropped would scorch the earth and even the fishes in the sea. If the White Brother's ego grew so large in making these inventions that he would not listen to the wisdom of the Red Brother, he would bring this world to an end in the Great purification of nature. Only a few would survive to bring forth the next world in which there would again be abundance and harmony. (p. 1)

Indigenous Elders tell us that the time for this is near and that the need for dialogue is urgent and compelling. But they also caution us that we may not be prepared to respect the richness of each others' contributions and the outcome of our respective missions. The juxtaposition of these perspectives can help in our journey through regions that early explorers called *terra incognita*, or an unknown land. The warning that "here be dragons" often followed. Reconciling

Indigenous and Western knowledge to improve Aboriginal child welfare services can lead into uncharted land, which calls for uncommon wisdom and guidance. The risks are not only worth taking, but also essential. Only by merging Western and Indigenous knowledge can we break the ever tightening bonds of Weber's iron cage and free all people to recognize their common humanity. Ultimately, we hope that we can begin to recognize the wisdom inherent in all spiritual traditions and recognize our fundamental brotherhood and sisterhood. This chapter tells the story of one small attempt to do so.

Our Aboriginal colleagues have articulated their hope for a child welfare system that works for them. Their intent is clear and their objective is sound. It is also clear that the path to this objective is strewn with overt obstacles, hidden dangers, fog laden forests, impenetrable impediments, and lurking lunatics. Some of these may be easier to spot than others. They include explanatory discussions of oppression, colonialism, Euro-centrism, domination, and exploitation. The impacts of systemic poverty and racial discrimination are well-known and require little elaboration. A federal government that has had much practice in evading its full fiduciary responsibility towards Aboriginal peoples, and provincial governments that collude with this evasion, only perpetuate the dilemma. Canada's non-Aboriginal citizens seem at best to be bemused, and at worst, hostile toward Aboriginal people who have been socially constructed under the regime of colonialism to be dependent upon the larger society.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal communities continue to lose their most precious resource, their children, to child welfare systems. These systems, more often than not, end up destroying children's affiliation with their people, leaving far too many as lost souls disconnected from both their communities of origin and their adopted communities. Some end up on the street or in jail. Although there are exceptions, such interventions all too often do not create happy, healthy, and productive adults (Richard, 2004).

To what do we attribute such tragedies? Research conducted under the umbrella of MOHS and other initiatives has begun to reveal the impact of residential schools and foster care on Aboriginal children. As we reflect upon the seemingly inexorable flow of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal care, it is evident that current service and program paradigms are at odds with traditional Aboriginal ways

of thinking. It is time to reflect upon the foundations of such programs, as Aboriginal people seek a return to traditional values that can inform the development of new and more relevant program models.

If we are to break the cycle of destructive practices that have nearly decimated Aboriginal cultures and ways of life, it is important to reflect on Indigenous peoples' experiences with oppression and colonization over the past 500 years. This calls for an examination of deeply held assumptions, values, and attitudes that can have a possibly unconscious, but always powerful, impact on our behaviours. An alternative perspective is needed that builds greater understanding of the Aboriginal worldview.

The importance of reflection on this matter is timely in light of the discourse initiated by the Reconciliation initiative, launched in 2005 in Niagara Falls, Ontario (Reconciliation in Child Welfare, 2006). Although it was recognized at this event that important policy and legislative changes have been made in support of greater autonomy for Aboriginal child welfare programs, these changes are insufficient in achieving self-determination in the delivery of such services. And the challenges associated with reconciliation between Aboriginal people and members of the dominant society are no simple matter, as they involve the most difficult change of all—that of changing minds of others. To support Aboriginal self-determination in developing policy and practice that fits with Aboriginal traditions and beliefs calls for uncommon humility on the part of decision-makers and receptivity to different ways of thinking. This task is further complicated by the reality that many Aboriginal professionals have been educated in mainstream child welfare systems of practice. Many are gaining a greater understanding of their heritage in this way, but at the same time, they are often cautious about being unduly influenced by the educational and socialization system to which they have been exposed, resulting in what Little Bear (2000) called "jagged colonialism."

Instead, Aboriginal communities are being challenged to become even more aware of their own internalized oppression and the challenges of creating social work practice that is congruent with their traditional worldview and values. This calls upon the best of the community's collective wisdom. Many of those who wish to promote

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such collective wisdom believe that the way forward lies in trusting the wisdom of the Elders and accepting them as our guides on this journey.

The issue is further complicated by the challenges involved in fully understanding a different epistemology. This can be especially daunting when the dominant society is largely unaware of its contribution to the oppression of Aboriginal people. This is evident when new knowledge derived from work with Aboriginal people fails to resonate at a deep enough level to create greater understanding and change deeply engrained practices, which are based on subconscious beliefs and attitudes. Our partnerships demand an authentic sharing of knowledge and an intensive collaboration in creating new paths. Mutual respect and recognition of the integrity of the "natural" Aboriginal cultural context must be our guides as we continue our journey together, a journey whose difficulties cannot be underestimated.

The MOHS initiative confirms that community perceptions about child welfare issues in Aboriginal communities begin with human rather than technocratic responses. Our collaboration is premised on the assumption that Aboriginal cultural integrity conflicts with many of the prevalent approaches to the delivery of child welfare services. The holistic and flexible models favoured by Aboriginal families and communities differ greatly from the specialized and often rigid practice models that prevail in most of child welfare. We are learning from the stories gathered in our work that the outcomes of current child welfare interventions for many Aboriginal children have been abysmal, and in some respects, worse than those of the residential school system. Some survivors from foster care who grew up as the only Aboriginal person in non-Aboriginal communities claim to have been badly off throughout their childhood, because they were deprived of the companionship of peers who shared their culture, language, and values. In response to the question of how bad things happen when good people have good intentions, Milloy (2005) replied that:

Doing "good" is apparently better than doing "nothing" well—and so hangs the tale of the residential school system, and the child welfare system too, which could only afford child protec-

tion (removal of children from their families) rather than prevention activity. (p. 2)

The MOHS initiative strives to move beyond attempts at doing good, to the development of joint approaches in ways that call on us to reflect upon the experiences of the past and to learn from the community about what might be done to rectify fundamental injustices to Aboriginal families—injustices that many of us believe continue to this day in spite of major efforts to change.

MAKING OUR HEARTS SING

Goals of the Initiative

It seems clear that some wrong turns have been taken in over a century of residential school and child welfare programs that were established to care for and educate Aboriginal children. Much of this history has been characterized by a lack of respect for and understanding of the legitimate aspirations of Indigenous people. The MOHS initiative took up the challenge of addressing some of the negative outcomes of this era by building collaboration among child welfare stakeholders and some Aboriginal communities to examine issues relating to child welfare from a community perspective. The MOHS initiative is striving to create innovative, effective, and practical approaches to child welfare that are in keeping with traditional Aboriginal worldviews and that contribute to reconciliation, healing, and increased community capacity.

Methodology

In addition to the authors, the following individuals played key leadership roles and brought the community together: Susan Bare Shin Bone, Director of the Blood Tribe Child and Family Services; Robin Little Bear, Director of the Kainai Legislative Initiative; and Robin's colleagues Kim Gravelle and Lance Tailfeathers. The efforts and support of the Elders advisory committee and the Band Council were fundamental to our efforts. Their ongoing interest and commitment to

their children and communities is admirable.

Appreciative Inquiry was the guiding methodology for the study. It was considered to provide a good fit with the research goals and Aboriginal cultures in three ways. First, Appreciative Inquiry moves away from a problem focus to a participatory, strengths perspective. In this approach, people collectively celebrate their accomplishments, build on their successes, and act upon their dreams and wishes for the future (Elliot, 1999; Hammond, 1996). This strengths approach is consistent with calls to move away from deficit approaches to understanding Aboriginal communities and toward approaches that highlight the competence and resiliency of Aboriginal people. It is considered that such shifts can contribute to the design of new and culturally-meaningful approaches to community needs (McShane & Hastings, 2004). Second, the Appreciative Inquiry process is a participatory approach that provides a voice to Aboriginal perspectives, which have traditionally been silenced (Sinclair, 2004). Third, storytelling is the primary data collection approach of Appreciative Inquiry—a practice that is congruent with Aboriginal oral traditions. Storytelling has also been conceptualized as a consciousness-raising type of activity that allows people to relate to each other, develop greater self-awareness, break the silence, and contextualize their experiences from their own worldview (Abosolon & Willett, 2004).

Storytelling or unstructured interviews in the form of gatherings or sharing circles were used to collect data for the project. A sharing circle begins with an open-ended question, which in this case was the set of MOHS research questions as well as the objectives of that gathering. Each participant in the circle has the opportunity to share his or her perspective on the question or issue. The gatherings focussed on the implications of the legacy of residential schools for child welfare, developing community and youth leadership, and sharing and learning from the gatherings. The specific focus of the gatherings in each community varied according to community needs and interests. More than 200 community members, leaders, professionals, and Elders from the Blood Tribe were involved as participants in three gatherings. The gatherings and stories were audio-recorded and transcribed, and in many cases, filmed.

In summary, Appreciative Inquiry approach provides a holistic

and participatory approach that values multiple ways of knowing and working collaboratively from a strengths perspective towards a shared vision. It was hoped that this would help generate community-empowered approaches to child welfare, which could serve as exemplars for other Aboriginal communities.

MESSAGES FROM THE COMMUNITY GATHERINGS

Overall Messages

In the community gatherings of MOHS, the participants' renewed vision for child welfare services began to unfold. All seemed to acknowledge that existing programs are not working well, if the rising number of Aboriginal children in care is an indicator. Many were concerned that child welfare today may inadvertently parallel the colonial experience of residential schools, and perpetuate similar long-term negative outcomes for Aboriginal communities. The impact for those who have experienced either or both systems is evident in the alarming statistics of Aboriginal peoples' continued trauma as reflected by high rates of suicide, poverty, substance abuse, family violence, family breakdown, school drop-out, and escalating child welfare caseloads in Aboriginal communities.

Although many Aboriginal child welfare agencies are seeking models of practice that are more consistent with their worldviews to counter these trends, there is a dearth of "new" models that incorporate "old" ways of responding to a growing understanding of the impact of colonization, residential school experiences, and the sixties scoop on Aboriginal communities and families. A consensus is evolving that calls for new approaches to child welfare intervention and prevention founded on a sound understanding of the history and current reality of Aboriginal people. The Blood Tribe is well positioned for such an undertaking because they have completed extensive work in recent years to create a new governance framework as the foundation for Aboriginal ownership and leadership in child welfare.

We have found that the creation of a new vision is not without its challenges. On the one hand, there is a strong and continuing desire among many Aboriginal people and their allies to build upon tradi-

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tional Aboriginal strengths and values, such as courage, respect for each other and for nature, the oral tradition and the wisdom of the Elders, a deep connection with each other, and a consistent application of spiritual relationships to all of life. Cultural camps and some child welfare service models provide concrete examples of the power of these concepts to improve daily life.

On the other hand, the loss of culture and tradition resulting from colonization continues to affect the lives of Aboriginal people, and non-Aboriginal people are often unaware of the oppressive impact of their assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes towards Aboriginal people. The Blood Tribe is clear about the essential values and philosophy that must guide the development of programs and services. They stress the importance of shared parenting and community responsibility for children, the importance of language as a source of renewed culture, knowledge of history and tradition as an essential element of identity, the importance of kinship, and connection to each other and a respectful approach to the planet. There is, however, a chasm between what Aboriginal communities envision and the realities of funding and policy restrictions. The gap in our understanding is vast, and we have much to learn. The Elders have been enormously patient with current efforts to learn from their wisdom. But time is pressing as the community loses one Elder per week—people who are often the sole repositories of an ancient oral tradition that cannot be replaced. This calls for urgent action.

Specific Messages

The most important specific message from the community gatherings was that the incorporation of cultural practices that support important familial and community kinship systems is critical to a process of recovery. This has two prerequisites. First, Canada and the provinces must own their responsibility to change legislation and funding in ways that mitigate the impact of colonial policies on Aboriginal communities, families, and children, and allow for a higher degree of self-determination in charting their collective future. Second, Aboriginal people must intensify their awareness of the depth of colonization and its impact on their communities, especially on the children and youth who remain at high risk. Unless these prerequisites occur, the

disconnection from Aboriginal beliefs and values, and the resulting devaluing of their child rearing and human development practices will be perpetuated.

An approach to child welfare consistent with Aboriginal culture would focus on family and collective human relationships. It would strengthen a collective approach to child care responsibilities that encompasses the cultural continuity of a people. Cultural continuity is the cornerstone for the amelioration of the most negative and destructive impacts of colonization. Socialization and educational theories and practices are fundamental to the survival of parenting practices for any cultural group or society. In fact, they are essential to the group's meaning of life and the purpose of their existence.

In addition to the above, two major clusters of themes that emerged from the community gatherings express the cultural and societal crisis of the community and its understanding of the path of recovery. These clusters are: 1) the recovery and affirmation of culture and a way of life; and 2) the structural impact of colonization and collective trauma. The first cluster of themes focussed on identity, relationships, and the interconnectedness of language with a way of life supported by the teachings of the Elders, the passing on of stories that are their knowledge system (education), and the importance of kinship systems as important components of responsibility for child care, socialization, and education. The second cluster of themes reflected the realities of their lived experience with colonial violence, the structural violence of poverty and marginalization, unemployment and racism, with the attending issues of substance abuse and lateral violence among community and family members.

Cluster one: Recovery and affirmation of culture and way of life

Three inter-related themes are described within this cluster.

1. Making a path for children so that they can live

The cultural identity of the tribe is the most significant component in revitalizing and affirming traditional methods of child care. Tribal identity is based upon a common worldview of the nature of human

beings, and their relationship to nature. These primary relationships shape the nature of relationships within family and community. The incorporation of the physical and metaphysical world, family, and ancestors is fundamental to kinship relations. The separation and disconnection of people from the essence of their existence has been the most profound impact of residential schools and child welfare systems, as the unity and wholeness of an all-inclusive universe is at the heart of Aboriginal peoples' connection to their cultural and social identity.

The community said that the teachings and stories must be once again told to the children and that "our children must know who they are." The children must be given their cultural names; this is what connects them with the universe, the land, their community, and their family. Most importantly, this is what provides them with a place from which to securely participate in the world, as they draw on the kinship relations from which their names are derived. Reuniting and affirming these relational connections and the responsibilities imbued in these relationships is the essential function of cultural and social identity.

The stories must be told in the original language. Language reflects the philosophical system of the people and evokes a relational perspective that mirrors their sacred world (Bastien, 2004). It reflects the meanings ascribed to existence, the purpose of relationships, and the responsibilities inherent in these connections. It provides a way of interpreting the world in which they live (Bastien, 2004). Language guides the epistemology and pedagogical practices of the tribe; it is instrumental in creating knowledge and creating reality (Bastien, 2004). It is the medium for incorporating knowledge systems and creating identity. New responsibilities, organizational structures, programs, and services can flow from this connection to traditional knowledge and the responsibilities of the collective. Inclusion and connection are integral to the way of life and identity of Indigenous people and can serve to inform revitalized programs and services. More specifically, participants stressed the importance of revisiting education by:

- incorporating Indigenous methods of research,
- recording and documenting traditional knowledge,

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- rethinking educational programs,
- Involving the community in changing the social environment,
- making language education mandatory, and
- educating young parents in traditional ways of parenting.

2. Collective recovery through participating in Indigenous culture

The disruptions to Aboriginal family and community life derive from colonization and, more specifically, from the residential school experience, some aspects of which are perpetuated in current approaches to child welfare service delivery. A new approach would be consistent with Aboriginal values, which affirm attachment to family and community, parental bonding, kindness, and nurturing children with love and acceptance as essential components of services and programs. Recent scientific thinking about the nature of reality suggests that everything is related to everything else in the universe. In other words, material objects are no longer perceived as independent entities but as a concentration of energy of the quantum field. This knowledge is not new to Indigenous people who have always understood the universe to be the indivisible whole that quantum physics now understands. This indivisible wholeness of the universe is the source of Aboriginal spirituality. The cultural principles and assumptions of Aboriginality—a way of life based on spirituality as the source of all relationships—calls upon all people to assume responsibility for all relationships.

An Indigenous human development approach based on collective responsibilities must guide the development of programs and services for families and children. It must begin with those who are most vulnerable and who contain the greatest hope for a new era for Aboriginal people—their children. The participants were adamant that language is mandatory and that their stories form the foundation of knowledge systems, of inclusiveness and harmony, and of the knowledge that guides the interpretation of experience. Language provides the forum and medium for speakers to call into existence a world of relationships and alliances. This calls for a social and spiritual order that places them in a universal social system, where all

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things are interrelated. This social system essentially consists of relationships held together by an affinity to all of life and an intention for survival. Collectively, it is being responsible for the health and peace of all. Communal well-being is a collective, sacred responsibility and the essence of the purpose for living. Children must be taught about their ancestors, their history, and their alliances through story, ceremony, and language. Cultural continuity means integrating tribal ways into everyday life, and it is in this experience that the identity of Indigenous people can best be understood.

The participants valued coming together at feasts and gatherings to renew and revitalize communal values and the affinity of kinship systems. Such gatherings are the traditional methods for gathering and promoting collective knowledge and wisdom. They renew and strengthen collective responsibility and, through consensus, call for action to address the challenges of the day. Gatherings revitalize traditional ways for strengthening the affinity of collective and family ties, affirming and utilizing knowledge building, decreasing external dependencies, developing Indigenous leadership and practices, and creating new sources of knowledge for recovery.

Spirituality is expressed by the community, as an ontological responsibility for strengthening family and kinship alliances that create a more sustainable and thriving community, with a focus on the wisdom of the Elders and the potential for a more hopeful future for children and youth. It is based upon traditional teaching and learning, with each person taking responsibility for the various roles of family and community. It is a method of forging new alliances and coming to know your relatives. Spirituality is respectfully caring for family, Elders, children, parents, and grandparents. Respect is striving to preserve the sacred nature of all relationships that life holds for everyone and everything, and between everyone and everything. It is the "all my relatives" of the tribe. This means to live in ceremony, to be respectful, and to honour all relationships as the source of communal strength. Spirituality is living and being in a way with life that includes the sacred. The community stressed the importance of the following practices to support and affirm this more spiritual way of life:

- Spirituality must be expressed in sacred ways of prayer and

include smudging ceremonies, feasts, and gatherings that promote kinship and connection to each other and to the creator.

- These would enhance kinship and knowledge of one's relatives, create greater harmony in the community, and provide a means for passing on the teachings of the Kainai (Blood Tribe), leading to not only knowing, but fully living traditional values.
- Such activities at a deeply spiritual level could promote healing from the process of colonization, leading community members to take greater responsibility for themselves by pursuing further education and preparing for greater self-reliance.

3. Living in ceremony demonstrates traditional knowledge and teaching

Traditional teachings about collective responsibilities are the guiding principles for everyday living. They have a transformational impact on community life and social organization, and can improve the quality of life for all members. The hope is that families and community will have stronger connections because of a more culturally appropriate approach and the use of their Indigenous language. This approach is based on coming together as a Nation in a return to traditional teachings led by the Elders, and in a process governed by communal values. Aboriginal culture has the healing properties of collective spiritual practices and organizational structures that are needed to address the challenges of a fragmented and wounded nation. By recovering and affirming their practices of authenticity and integrity premised on their traditional teachings, Aboriginal people can begin a collective healing process. Implementing an affirming cultural approach and reconstructing social systems and community collective responsibilities would form the context for education, research, and the creation of more culturally appropriate policies and services.

A comprehensive strategy guided by traditional principles of collective responsibility will begin with a community development approach. Community awareness, education, and training for tribal

entities are essential for the implementation of policy and program changes. The participants stressed the urgency of developing programs where youth are taught by Elders and where there are social workers trained in Aboriginal culture, if the vision of the community is to be realized. The revitalization and affirmation of cultural identities is seen as the long-term solution for child welfare and youth at risk. This calls for *Aatsimihkasin*, which means living in a sacred manner.

Cluster two: Structural impact of colonization and collective trauma

The themes in Cluster Two sum up community perceptions of issues that must be addressed to deal with the impact of structural violence. The community is interested in bringing together youth and Elders to build a stronger community and to support families in loving one another.

A belief in power and control has been central to mastery of one culture over another and, in the Euro-Western view at least, human culture over nature. Colonialism has made Indigenous nations dependent by stripping them of their own resources, their means of economic sustainability, and their ways of knowledge production, leaving a legacy of abuse and violence that rendered them powerless and demoralized. This continues in policies of apartheid, marginalization, economic dependency, stigmatization, and stereotyping—the very fabric of those same policies that initiated the process of genocide. The violence that continues on reserves in Canada includes overt physical violence, structural violence, and psycho-spiritual violence. This violence terrorizes and re-traumatizes communities with programs structured on the very tenets of genocide—hierarchy, paternalism, patriarchy, power, control, rationality, and empiricism. These tenets continue to fragment and isolate individuals, creating community despair and hopelessness. Aboriginal communities in Canada continue to rank near the bottom of the United Nations quality of life index, while other Canadians are positioned near the top (Blackstock & Bennett, 2002). Poverty, inadequate housing, and substance abuse are leading factors for child welfare involvement and must be addressed if significant gains are to be

achieved (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). Such factors are deeply rooted in the structural violence of genocide and herein lies the fallacy for those who would limit their efforts to assimilation, adaptation, rehabilitation, reconciliation, accommodation, and advocacy as the only possible strategies to be considered. If these systemic structural issues are not seriously addressed, there can be little hope for achieving the goal of improving the lives of Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

Community members called for urgent collaboration and community action on the following issues:

- Fundamental, systemic factors, such as poverty and inadequate housing, are priority issues for improving the health of the community.
- Healing, employment, and other means of improving self-sufficiency are essential for Aboriginal men to regain their self-respect and valued place in the community. Although this theme was not explored further in the community gatherings, the idea likely arises from the lack of opportunities for men and the belief that they have suffered greatly from the loss of their role and place in the community.
- Lateral and family violence and increasing rates of alcohol abuse are critical issues.
- In light of the ongoing loss of their children to child welfare systems, the community wishes to create laws to protect the children who have been adopted outside the community and to develop longer term foster care solutions where necessary, by finding better ways of keeping their children close to them.
- The growth of gang violence is increasingly worrisome.
- There were calls for increased parental involvement in planning more responsive child welfare programs.
- Of special concern was the health and well-being of the Elders who are said to be dying at the rate of one per week in a community that depends upon them to pass on values, history, and tradition. This is critical to the future of the

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community and to the formation of culturally appropriate programs and services.

NEXT STEPS FOR MOHS

Future work for the MOHS initiative involves:

- working with Elders and ceremonialists in the construction of knowledge systems, conceptual frameworks, and pedagogy for social work practice based on cultural integrity;
- developing, with the community, new program models and a legislative framework that are in harmony with Aboriginal ways of life;
- evaluating existing models that offer promise for broader application;
- establishing demonstration projects to affirm and evaluate the community recommendations;
- developing curriculum for Aboriginal social work leadership and organizational change; and
- developing training programs for human services workers working with First Nations communities that pursue cultural continuity as their primary objective.

The authors look forward to these challenges and wish to express gratitude and recognition of the people of the Blood Reserve for their commitment, wisdom, and generosity of spirit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

This chapter would not be complete for us as social work educators if we did not own up to the deficiencies of our own institutions of learning and our profession. The authors believe that anti-colonial epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies are required to affirm, rediscover, and reconstruct the knowledge systems and social organizations of First Nations people. The context, reality, and aspirations of First Nations people must become integrated in our

research and knowledge production to counter the current imbalance in power relationships, which perpetuates a construction of knowledge primarily based upon colonial assumptions that maintain oppression. Social work education and practice must develop curricula that support structural change and reflect anti-oppressive practice by transforming conceptual frameworks in ways that support Aboriginal aspirations and right to self-determination.

As Aboriginal people seek to renew and invigorate their own spirituality as a source of strength, perhaps social work should also look deeply into its spiritual roots. Zapf (2003) suggested that as a profession seeking to improve its status as an evidence-based discipline, social work may have avoided spiritual issues because they were perceived as unscientific. This pattern is changing as social workers express a renewed interest in spirituality. Drouin, as cited in Zapf (2003), attributed this renewal to "a longing for profound and meaningful connections to each other, to ourselves, and to something greater than ourselves" (p. 34). This longing has arisen because detrimental effects of the Western mindset of individualism and materialism on the environment and community. Drouin saw evidence of "growing spiritual longing" in social work practitioners, in clients, and in Western society as a whole (p. 36).

Zapf (1999) suggested that, although some authors have attempted to include traditional knowledge or "Aboriginal theory" as part of the knowledge base for mainstream social work practices, the assumption that traditional Aboriginal knowledge is just another theory base disguises a fundamental difference in worldview. Morrissette, McKenzie, & Morrissette (1993) expressed the essence of this difference:

While Aboriginal people do not embrace a single philosophy, there are fundamental differences between the dominant Euro-Canadian and traditional Aboriginal societies, and these have their roots in differing perceptions of one's relationship with the universe and the Creator. (p. 93)

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Hart (1996) compared Western and Aboriginal approaches in the following manner:

Western models of healing separate and detach individuals from their social, physical, and spiritual environments, isolating "patients" for treatment purposes and then re-introducing them into the world. Traditional healers are concerned with balancing emotional, physical, mental, spiritual aspects of people, the environment, and the spirit world. (p. 63)

Zapf (2003) attributed a spiritual sense of interconnectedness to Aboriginal social work and asked if spirituality might not be a key to expanding our understanding of the person/environment relationship and the profound connections between ourselves and the world around us.

CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

Our goal has been to reconcile Aboriginal and Western approaches in the delivery of child welfare services. We have discussed some key elements of these worldviews and are increasingly sensitive to the dragons that lie in our path of greater understanding. We believe that many of the dragons that might endanger the achievement of a more balanced perspective are contained in Weber's caution about the dangers of unrestrained bureaucratic systems and their imposition on a people whose history and values are in direct opposition. To elaborate on our introduction to this chapter, we offer Weber's warning (as cited in Elwell, 1996), about the creation of an iron cage:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals or, if neither, mechanized petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has obtained a level of civilization never before achieved." (On Social Evolution section, para. 4)

We are not so naive as to believe that the cage we have so carefully wrapped ourselves in can be easily escaped. After all, it has now become normal for human beings to live in complex, specialized, and often over-regulated social environments that can stifle the flow of human intercourse and deaden our spirits. Many live in ways that fail to recognize their connection as human beings, let alone as spiritual beings who are intimately connected in ways that quantum physics is now recognizing—confirming what major world spiritual systems have been saying for a long time. Is it not possible that Aboriginal views, with their spiritual sources linked to an ancient animist belief in the soul or other spiritual forms as distinct from the physical or material, might have been the first to identify and to live in recognition of these fundamental spiritual principles? If so, perhaps the ancient Hopi legend cited in the beginning of the chapter has to be taken seriously so that the Red and White Brothers can come together and build on each other's experiences and learning for all our sakes.

This calls for living in a sacred manner, or *Aatsimihkasin*. It calls for a clearer understanding of the impact of the destruction of the Aboriginal way of life, and the importance of confronting the challenges of cultural continuity and collective survival. Countering genocidal impacts and becoming a thriving community depends on the continuity of cultural ways and kinship systems. It depends on the creation of social programs and structures that support kinship relational roles and responsibilities, as the continuity of kinship is critical to the well-being and survival of the community and is the foundation of identity for Aboriginal people. The question is whether policy makers, funders, academics, and all others who retain power over Aboriginal people can understand sufficiently what is being said, drop their self-perceived sense of superiority, and replace it with humility and a willingness to learn from the experiences acquired over 500 years of oppression.

For example, the MOHS participants valued coming together to renew and revitalize communal values and their affinity as kinsmen. Such events are not common practice in child welfare systems, but they are valuable ways of gathering and promoting collective knowledge and wisdom. They have demonstrated the communities' capacity to renew and strengthen collective responsibility and, through a consensus model, to promote action on the challenges of the day.

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They ultimately affirm and utilize knowledge-building, decrease external dependencies, develop Indigenous leadership, and create new sources of knowledge for recovery.

The bars to the iron cage are more rigid than ever. We do not have the temerity to recommend that the cage be dismantled and discarded. It seems that this would be too frightening for all of us, because we do not know what would replace it. Yet we are convinced that we need more freedom to achieve better solutions. Perhaps the best that can be done for now is to loosen the bonds of the iron cage and allow its residents some room to breathe, to live more fully, to honour the divine in each other with love and respect, and to begin moving in a new direction. Perhaps Weber will rest more easily in his grave and perhaps we will all live more fulfilling lives.

Our challenge is now to continue the collaboration and take steps to implement community recommendations. This calls for local, provincial, and federal authorities to acknowledge the importance of community views in policy and program development. It means recognizing that for the most part, children are as safe and well cared for as their families and communities have the capacity to provide, and reinforces the importance of community capacity-building. It means that we can no longer impose rigid processes that do not work and that consume immense staff and community resources with little benefit for children and their families. It means that we need to collaborate on the development of program designs that promote community development and reduce procedural requirements that contribute little to program quality. Mostly, it means beginning to let loose the bounds of an iron cage that can stifle life and limit the innate creativity in those who care about others.

AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors are both members of the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, and come from very different backgrounds. Our association over the past several years has brought home the importance of learning how each of us sees the world. We have encountered our share of dragons, but we have also learned how to make our hearts sing. Betty Bastien is a Blackfoot woman from the Peigan Reserve in Southern Alberta. She teaches, and conducts

research and community work on the Blood Reserve. She has been a passionate advocate of traditional ways as an antidote to the negative outcomes experienced by her people, which arise from the adoption of Western ways. She has written extensively on this topic, with her most recent publication, entitled *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, attracting great interest. Jean Lafrance is a non-Aboriginal professor (with distant remnants of Iroquois blood) who draws on more than 40 years experience in bureaucratic systems to share lessons about what he believes has, and has not, worked in serving Aboriginal children and their families. He is convinced that an approach to child welfare that is more consistent with Aboriginal worldviews can assist all communities in creating a more humane and ultimately a more spiritual approach to serving all communities. The authors have been on a journey, making their hearts sing and slaying dragons for several years, as they strive to understand each other's perspectives and to work together.

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