

AM I A MODERN DAY MISSIONARY? REFLECTIONS OF A CREE SOCIAL WORKER

Michael Hart, Ph.D. (Candidate)

INTRODUCTION

I have long held a desire to support others as I struggle forward, hopefully forward, in my own life. In the past, I did not reflect on this desire to any great extent: I just accepted it. It was a drive that came from my inner being. To fulfill my desire, I look in several directions and chose social work as the means. I saw that social work has the good intentions of helping people in need. Generally, I agreed with its philosophy that was based upon the values of humanitarianism and egalitarianism. But as I began my life as a social worker, particularly in university where I looked closely at social work, its values, and its practices. I also began to reflect upon social work as a means to helping. More recently, I've been focussing upon Indigenous peoples experiences with helpers and social workers.

Through my family history, our family stories, and the histories and stories of other Indigenous peoples, I have come to understand that there were many people who had a desire to help Indigenous people. Some of these stories and histories related to Christian missionaries. While it has been stated that many of the missionaries had positive, helpful intents and "...were important advocates, spokesmen, and mediators at a time when government officials refused to pay attention to Aboriginal spokespersons" (Carter, 1999, p. 76), the history of their judgements, condemnation, and oppression of Indigenous peoples cannot be ignored. One only has to reflect upon the thousands of lawsuits being brought forward by individuals who attended residential schools, read texts such as *Residential schools: The Stolen Years*, by Linda Jaine (1995), or review the report by Assembly of First Nations, *Breaking the Silence* (1994), to get a glimpse of terror and destruction that was inflicted by them.

As a social worker, I would like to believe that the only characteristic that social workers share with missionaries is the desire help others. However, as I move forward as a social worker, I continue to reflect

upon whether the social work profession has more in common with missionaries than this altruistic belief. This reflection was intensified after a discussion I had with a Cree woman who worked in the field, but was not trained as social worker. When she found out I was educated as a social worker, she stated, "Oh, so you're the social missionary." I was left wondering if I am really any different than the missionaries who negatively effected, if not oppressed and attacked, Indigenous people and cultures throughout many parts of the world. In other words, am I a modern day missionary? For me, this question continuous influences me. It raises further questions. In particular, if social workers and missionaries share many attributes, how can I continue to work as social worker given the atrocities Indigenous people has faced at the hands of missionaries? How can I partake in practices which are new extensions of the colonization processes undertaken, indeed lead by, missionaries? What can I do differently?

I realized that I cannot look only at my good intentions as a basis for my answers. After all, I imagine most missionaries had good intentions, yet they partook in what has been referred to as the American Holocaust (Stannard, 1992). As part of the teaching from the Elders I spend time with, *tapwewin* (honesty) is required for true self-reflection. In turn, *tapwewin* requires "...great care and careful consideration" (Cardinal and Hilderbrandt, 2000, p.48). It is with this teaching in heart that I share my reflections. I begin my reflection by looking at the foundation of social work and how it may relate to missionaries.

SOCIAL WORK AND MISSIONARIES

The social work profession is based upon humanitarian and egalitarian ideals (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994). In trying to understand this foundation, I reviewed the definitions of three key concepts: Ideal, humanitarianism, and egalitarianism. I then considered these concepts in relation to missionaries.

Ideal was the first concept that I reviewed. An ideal is A1: a standard of perfection, beauty, or excellence; 2: one regarded as exemplifying an ideal and often taken as a model for imitation; 3: an ultimate object or aim of endeavor: goal (Merriam-Websters, 2003). When I thought about holding ideals, it easily became apparent that missionaries had an ideal or ultimate objective in their work Indigenous people. They wanted to make us more human and less savage. This meant transforming us into

Christians (Fisher, 1988; Gibson, 1966; Huel, 1996; Todorov, 1984). As suggested by Tinker (1993), "...the missionaries all came to Native American tribal communities with firmly established commitments to their own European or Euro-american cultures with their social structures and institutions. As a result, they naturally assumed the superiority of the institutions and social structures of their own world and readily imposed them on Indian people" (p. 16). Furthermore, "...the idea of Indian deficiency that assumed, even demanded, that whites do something to or for Indians to raise them to European standards" (Berkhofer, 1978, p. 119).

I then reviewed humanitarian, which was defined as a person promoting human welfare and social reform (Merriam-Webster, 1999). Thus, one of the ideals, or ultimate objectives, for social workers is the promotion of the standard of excellent human welfare and social reform. Interestingly enough, when I looked up 'missionary' in the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1999), it stated, "...relating to, engaged in, or devoted to missions." A mission is A(1) the act or instance of sending; (2a) a ministry commissioned by a religious organization to propagate its faith or *carry on humanitarian work*. (p. 745, emphasis added). So, missionaries also promoted their beliefs and/or promoted human welfare and social reform. Considering the view held by some missionaries that questioned whether Indigenous people were fully human (Grant, 1996, p. 44; Stannard, 1996, p. 211), a significant part of missionary work was to promote Indigenous people to a closer state of personhood. However, for some of the first explorers and religious scholars, such as Fernandez de Oviedo and Juan Gines de Sepulveda, the degree to which Indigenous people could be promoted was limited since they were seen as indomitable and incorrigible (Losada, 1971). They advocated using whatever means necessary to support the spread of Christianity (Friede, 1971). As explained by Friede (1971), proponents of this view "...demanded that the incorporation of the Indian be carried out through his direct subjection to the American Spaniard" and that this "...desired incorporation of the Indian would be forcibly achieved, with the Spaniard acting as his civilizer" (p. 135).

I reviewed the definition of Egalitarianism next. It is, "...a social value; a belief in human equality leading one to treat others as peers or equals and to espouse equal access to goods and resources" (Barker, 1996, p. 116). Whether Indigenous people were to be treated as equals was also a concern for missionaries. Indeed there were debates on the

issue (Green and Dicakson, 1993). As explained by Stannard (1996), "Spanish philosophers and theologians debated amongst themselves whether Indians were men or monkeys, whether they were mere brutes or were permanent slaves of their European overlords" (p. 210). While some missionaries believed Indigenous people could not come out of their lower state and should not be treated equally, other missionaries believed that by providing the proper environment the Indigenous people could move up the hierarchy of living beings. "The noble savage was thought of as the ideal of mankind without institutions, in his natural state, awaiting the proper environment in which to be shaped and raised. If missionaries could simply surround the Indians with the right environment, the Indians would respond as whites did and quickly become productive citizens" (Higham, 2000). While I have never heard a social worker debate whether Indigenous people were monkeys, the emphasis on influencing the environment of Indigenous people sounded very much like social work's ecological approach to practice and its past attempts to help us become "productive citizens."

In considering the foundation of social work in relation to the basic premise of missionary work, I began to see how some people consider social workers as "social missionaries." Needless to say, I was somewhat disheartened to think that the field I choose to fulfill my desire to support others holds similarities to other helpers which have oppressed our people. But, I thought, the social code of ethics says more. In fact, the "...best interest of the client" is the first of ten principles. Surely this aspect of the code could ensure that misconceptions and misapplications of social works foundational values would never happen.

BEST INTEREST OF THE CLIENT...BUT ON WHOSE TERMS?

According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics* (1994) the best interest of the client means:

- (a) that the wishes, desires, motivations, and plans of the client are taken by the social worker the primary consideration in any intervention plan *developed by the social worker* subject to change only when the client's plans are documented to be unrealistic, unreasonable or potentially harmful to self or others or otherwise determined inappropriate when considered in relation to a mandate requirement,

- (b) that all actions and interventions of the social worker are taken subject to the reasonable belief that the client will benefit from the action, and
- (c) that the social worker will consider the client as an individual, a member of a family unit, a member of a community, a person with a distinct ancestry or culture and will consider those factors in any decision affecting the client.

What stands out to me within the context of this reflection is that the social worker remains in ultimate control of determining the plan. We may consider the people we serve, but if we believe the people's plan to be unrealistic, unreasonable, potentially harmful, or inappropriate to our mandate, then we can exclude considerations of their plan. I find this concerning in light of some historical similarities held with the practices of some missionaries. Certainly they had stopped to reflect on and discuss our ways of being and doing. Yet, after deliberations they can several "reasonable beliefs" including the views that we were potentially harmful to ourselves, that our actions were inappropriate to their mandate, or that our ways were no longer realistic ways of being (Dickason, 1997; Huel, 1996; Stannard, 1996; Tinker, 1993; Wearne, 1996). Further, missionaries took actions that were based upon their "reasonable belief" that we would benefit from their protection (Miller, 1989, 1996). They also "considered" our cultures. They often considered our culture as inferior and/or barbaric and/or uncivilized (Stannard, 1996; Todorov, 1984).

In light of these skewed views, to say the least, of Indigenous people that emerged in the past, I wanted to be certain that present day social workers would not follow the same line of deliberations and actions as the missionaries who were negative, punitive and degrading. I thought that one of the guides that social workers rely upon to ensure a more positive, supportive and accurate perspective is drawn also stems from our code of ethics. This guide is the requirement of competence.

SOCIAL WORK COMPETENCE...BUT WHO DEFINES IT?

According to section 3 of the *Code of Ethics* (1994), "...a social worker shall have and maintain competence in the provision of a social work service to a client." More specifically, 3.1 states, "...the social worker

shall not undertake a social work service unless the social worker has the competence to provide the service or the social worker can reasonably acquire the necessary competence without undue delay, risk or expense to the client." So perhaps social workers are so competent that comparing them to missionaries of the past is unwarranted. But what is competence?

The concept of competence is a very contested domain which does deserve its own focus generally, and particularly in relation to Aboriginal peoples. So it is with some hesitation that I only give it a cursory review. According to the *Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 1996), competence is: the ability to fulfill the requirements of a job or other obligation. Competence in social work includes possession of all relevant education and experiential requirements, demonstrated ability through passing licensing and certification exams, and the ability to carry out work assignments and achieve social work goals while adhering to the *values* and the *code of ethics* of the profession. (p. 71, original italics).

Competency-based practice is: the demonstrated ability to fulfill the professional obligations to the client, the community, the society, and the profession. This demonstration occurs through acquisition of *certification* and *licensing*, keeping up with the *knowledge base* by fulfilling *continuing education* requirements, and participating in agency *supervision*, and *in-service training*. (p. 71, original italics)

So if a social worker receives the required degree, follows the code of ethics, maintains the professional values, and keeps up with the knowledge base, the social worker is deemed competent. A competent social worker is able to then fulfill the requirements of a job or other obligation. Such a social worker, we hope, would be able to avoid, or better yet, offset the past work of missionaries. If this is true, then there is an assumption that the education and peer supervision in practice appropriately addresses the worldviews, ideas, practices, and realities of Indigenous peoples and actions.

As an institution established by European-based peoples, social work directly reflects their worldviews and ways of helping while paying minimal attention to Indigenous peoples worldviews and ways of helping. Its philosophies that act as its foundation, the theories which create the frameworks that stand on this foundation, the ethics that act as its mortar, and the practices which are windows into its worldviews

create a structure, a building if you like, which is far more often than not a foreign imposition on indigenous peoples.

Many times, social workers do not recognize how their profession has been created and imposed upon Indigenous peoples and lands. They remain in the comfort of their building and do not take the time to understand the Indigenous surroundings. Other times social workers recognize, usually after the fact, that they have created such an imposition and try to be more “sensitive” to the lives they are displacing. Hence, they look for ways of continuing to build their profession and practices without causing undo harm to the people they are alienating. At other times social workers recognize that they need to address the harm they have imposed, thus they try to spruce up their practice by working “cross-culturally.” They try to modify their building so it fits within the natural surroundings. At times, this is like trying to decorate a skyscraper that is in the middle of the bush with floral and nature prints so that it fits with the surroundings.

As a social work student and practitioner, I have been acculturated with the context of these efforts. Some of the instructors I know and peers I worked beside were unaware of how their theories and practices were impositions onto Indigenous peoples and our views, practices, and realities. They never mentioned or considered the appropriateness or effects of these theories and practices on Indigenous peoples. Others were “sensitive” and tried to recognize that what they taught or did may be harmful to Indigenous peoples and our ways of being. This usually meant asking me how to use their theory or approach with Aboriginal people so that they don’t offend them. Others look for how to fit their ideas and practices with Indigenous ways of being. More often than not this was a focus on the ecological approach.

SOCIAL WORK ITS RELATION TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

It is possible to see these relationships between social work and Indigenous people on a spectrum (see diagram 1). On one end are practices, approaches, theories and philosophies that are solely based upon European worldviews. Often these views are taken to be “universal,” thus applied to all peoples, including Indigenous peoples. Thus, there is no attention given to other peoples. Examples of this type of social work practices are the classical psychodynamic theory and cognitive-behavioural practices. Next to this is European-based social

work that is “culturally-sensitive” to “others.” Usually this means that there is still an universal application focus, but there are attempts to apply it in a way that is not offensive to non-European-based people. Social work from this base recognizes differences exist, but if these differences are addressed at all, it is only in an indirect manner. Examples of this type of social work are the ecological and strengths perspectives. Then there is European-based social work that is universally and cross-culturally orientated. Under this process there is a focus on the applicability of the social work process across cultures, primarily from Europeans to non-Europeans, and an attempt to modify it to fit with the other peoples. Examples of this type of social work include the structural approach to social work (Mullaly, 1997), a critical social work approach (Mullaly, 2002), and the multicultural counselling theory (Sue, Ivey, and Pedersen, 1996).

Despite the clear effort to modify social work so that it applies more broadly, I believe the more we rely on European-based social work and the less we utilize Indigenous ways of helping as the basis for social work practitioners working with, either directly or indirectly, Indigenous peoples, the more likely we will consciously or unconsciously oppress Indigenous peoples, including those of us who are Indigenous social workers. In other words, the more likely we will be fulfilling the functions of social missionaries. While there are Indigenous individuals who welcome European-based social work practices, just as there many converts to the missionaries’ worldviews, we cannot continue to oppress the many other Indigenous persons and peoples who want to stand with their Indigenousness.

BUILDING ON OUR BASE: MAINTAINING OUR PEOPLESNESS

So what can we do? We need to change social work. We need to expand the spectrum of social work practice, approaches, theories, and philosophies. We need to strongly recognize and build on the many helping practices that are Indigenous-based. We can build on the type of helping practices that are Indigenous based and cross-culturally appropriate for work with many Indigenous peoples, and possibly to non-Indigenous peoples. These type of helping practices are based upon the commonalities and generalizations between Indigenous peoples while acknowledging the differences between Indigenous and European-based worldviews and practices. Despite the differences,

these practices are likely to fit well in a non-Indigenous context. As such, these types of helping practices can fit well within social work. Examples of these types include the model outlined by Brad McKenzie and Vern Morrisette and (2003) and the work of Heilbron and Gutterman (2000). Another type of helping practices are those that are Indigenous based and cross-culturally appropriate, particularly to Indigenous peoples. These practices of helping are based upon a smaller set of Indigenous nations' ways and may not be as broad in their applications as the previous type of helping practices. Still, they may be used with other Indigenous nations since they are sensitive to alternative Indigenous perspectives. They may also reach some of the non-Indigenous population despite the differences in the worldviews. As such, they can fit with social work. Examples of these types of helping practices include an Aboriginal approach (Hart, 2002), material from Anderson's (2000) book *A recognition of being*, and Herb Nabigon and Ann Marie Mawhinney's *Outline of Aboriginal Theory* (1996). A further type of helping practices are those which are based in a particular Indigenous nation's perspective. The application stems from practices of the particular nation and usually does not attempt to address differences between its own and perspectives from other nations or those from a European-based worldview. These types of helping practices may be used in social work, but with people who hold similar worldviews or are accepting of the perspective. Examples of material which reflect this type of helping practices include Taiaiake Alfred's (1999) *Peace power righteousness: An Indigenous manifesto* and Kathy Absolon's (1993) *Healing as practice*.

To maintain an expanded perspective we need to recognize other ways of helping practice, namely the traditional healing practices of recognized Elders and healers. These ways of helping are based in a particular Indigenous nation and have specific healing applications that are based upon the nation's worldviews. While practitioners of these ways clearly recognize that differences in worldviews exist, they generally do not address the differences between practices of differing nations, nor do they address the differences between Indigenous and European/North American nations. While the focus of these ways of helping remains within the ways of helping found within a particular nation, practitioners may be open to serving people from other nations. However, practitioners of these helping ways are unlikely to alter their ways so that it can be used within social work. More likely, practitioners may be willing to work as an aligned service. Examples are the Elders and traditional healers in Indigenous communities.

Another example in the literature is Russel Willier described in *Cry of the eagle* (Young, Ingram, and Swartz, 1990).

SO AM I A MODERN DAY MISSIONARY?

While I like to think that I am not a modern day missionary, I don't honestly know. I do realize that the only way I can continue to practice as a social worker is if I continue to learn about myself as a Cree man. For me, this means that I have seek out the guidance of Elders and traditional healers so that I can be lead by our teachings. I have to go back to our stories and seek how they can inform me on how to work with people today. I have to learn from our traditional healing ways and try to understand how they can enhance my practice. As a Cree social worker, I have to contribute to *changing* the field of social work. I have to rely upon our own worldviews and philosophies and the theories, approaches, and practices that stem from them. I have to contribute to these theories, approaches and practices by applying them and/or developing them further. I have to overcome those obvious and not so obvious practices and ideas that oppress our ways of being and doing. I have to remain open to Indigenous communities and their critique of social work, and of me. Without this openness, I will be at risk of losing my connection. As my mother has directed me, I must always remember where I come from as I go forward in this field. I remain hopeful that this is the way I may be able partake in social work, despite its connections to colonial processes. Perhaps this way I may be able to do things differently.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I recognize that this reflection piece has many holes that are neglected. Not all of the missionaries' work resulted in harm to our peoples and cultures. Not all missionaries sought to tear down our cultures. Our code of ethics probably goes further to protect people than any similar codes of four hundred years ago. Similarly, there are many social workers who have a deep desire to support our peoples emancipation from the colonial processes and its effects. There have been efforts by some social workers to make the ecological approach applicable to work with Indigenous peoples and others who have actively sought out Indigenous ways of helping as a means to helping

the people they serve. Yet, I cannot ignore that helper's comment, "...so you're a *social* missionary." I believe ignoring the perceptions people have of us as social workers or explaining them away without considering how this connections may have emerged for them will not help us avoid the pitfalls that caught so many before us. I believe by acknowledging the images, stories, and connections of social work and missionaries we will be better prepared to create, support, and advocate for our own Indigenous-based helping philosophies, theories, approaches, and practices. We will recognize the work that lies ahead of us as Indigenous social work helpers and educators. Most importantly, we will better recognize the path we need to take.

An introductory spectrum¹ of Amer-European and Indigenous based helping practices

| Based in the worldviews and philosophies that are... | Amer-European | Amer-European | Indigenous | Specific to several Indigenous | specific to an Indigenous nation |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|
| applications | universal | universal, but only sensitive in their applications to non Amer-European peoples and ways | universal within a cross-cultural context | While these applications may be Indigenous universal within a cross cultural context, they are more applicable to a smaller number of Indigenous nations. May be used within non-Indigenous context | While other Indigenous nations may tap into these applications, they are specific to Indigenous nation |
| How differences in worldviews are addressed | recognizes no differences | recognizes differences exist, may address indirectly. If recognized, tendency to treat all Indigenous nations as a group with one worldview | recognizes and addresses differences directly. Tendency to treat all Indigenous nations as a group with one worldview | recognizes differences between Indigenous nations and between Indigenous and Amer-European Nations. The common worldviews of a smaller number of Indigenous nations are primarily included | Recognizes differences, however, these applications do not address the differences since they are highly focussed on one Indigenous nation's worldviews. |
| examples of theories, approaches, practices, authors, or publications | classical psychodynamic theory and classical cognitive-behavioural practices | ecological practice, strengths perspective | multicultural counselling and therapy (MCT), structural social work, a critical approach | An Aboriginal Approach (2002), Anderson's (2000) <u>A recognition of being</u> | Elders and traditional healers, Russel Willier in <u>City of the eagle</u> |

1. I wish to emphasize the spectrum is not made up of clear isolated categories, meaning that the parts of the spectrum would likely blend into the other parts to varying degrees. I would also imagine that some of the examples could be debated for being aligned in the manner which I have done here. Despite these possible debates, I hope the point that there degree to which practices relate to Indigenous peoples worldviews, and that even within Indigenous worldviews and practices there are significant variations.

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