NOT MY HOME

The Overrepresentation of Indigenous Children in Care

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TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS KINSHIP & FAMILY PRACTICES:

From time immemorial, Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, otherwise known as Canada, have flourished and lived abundantly among the land, their cultures, and within their families. Long before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous Peoples lived as distinct societies and had their own territorial boundaries, teachings, education systems, and governance (Manitowabi, n.d.). In First Nations societies, families are best understood in the concept of social networks of related people called kinship, in which an individual's identity, rights, and responsibilities are defined and given meaning (Canada First Nations Families, n.d.). For Indigenous Peoples, relationality and kinship are foundational and essential philosophies that guide almost every aspect of their life (Campbell et al., 2020). Families remain at the heart of healthy Indigenous communities, and it is within their families that they come to know their place in the world and to know themselves as part of the larger collective (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2015).

Indigenous Peoples carry strength and power through connections to their community and family. Extended family can even have extensive roles in child rearing in some Indigenous cultures (Muir & Bohr, 2019). Child and family well-being are not solely the responsibility of parents. Grandparents, aunties, uncles and everyone in a community, including leaders, neighbours and extended family members all have a role to play in the child's wellbeing. Children are viewed as gifts from the creator, and it is everyone’s responsibility to raise the spirit of the child (Manitowabi, n.d.).

OVERREPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN CARE

"First Nations children have been dramatically overrepresented in the Canadian child welfare system for more than 50 years" (Blackstock, 2009). According to the 2021 Canadian federal census, 53.8% of children in foster care are Indigenous, but account for only 7.7% of the child population. (Government of Canada, n.d.). It is suggested that Indigenous children are eight times more likely to come into child welfare care than any other children (Blackstock, 2009).

The historical trauma caused by the residential school system, the sixties scoop, and the significant misinterpretations by government officials and social workers on traditional Indigenous ways of parenting have largely played a role in these child apprehensions. Major colonial events such as the residential school system and policies like the Indian Act were the beginning to a long and painful future for Indigenous families and communities (Muir & Bohr, 2014). Children who attended residential schools did not encounter healthy parental role models and struggled with the capacity to care for their own children as adults (Trocmé et al., 2004). The disruption in strong and healthy Indigenous family practices has only added to the harmful colonial policies that Indigenous Peoples were and are up against.

WHAT PARTS OF HISTORY LED TO THIS?

The arrival of European settlers and extension of colonial practices and policies into Indigenous communities disrupted traditional patterns of care among Indigenous families and communities. The devastating history of Indigenous child welfare in Canada can be divided into three stages: the period of residential schools, the "sixties scoop", and the contemporary period (Kufeldf & Mckenzie, 2011).

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RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

The residential school system and Indian day schools were the primary mechanism of colonial efforts to force the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples into non-Indigenous society (Kufeldt & Mckenzie, 2011). Residential schools and Indian day schools were a favored technique of colonial efforts used by government and church officials as it promoted assimilation by enforcing sustained geographic separation of children from their parents and communities (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2011). Children forced into residential schools were forbidden to speak their own languages, practice their spiritual traditions or maintain their cultural traditions (Trocmé et al., 2004). Residential schools have impacted the lives of Indigenous children and families for generations, and the consequences are still very much evident today as the last residential school in Canada only closed in 1996.

“Colonialism, historical and intergenerational trauma as inflicted by the residential school system, has doubtlessly affected traditional child rearing techniques. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Interim report (2012), noted that residential school survivors specifically asked for support to both regain and teach traditional parenting values and practices as a means of improving their parenting skills (Muir & Bohr, 2014). Residential school survivors are working endlessly to end generational cycles of trauma and regain their traditional parenting practices however, it is not only the responsibility of Indigenous Peoples to decolonize these harmful colonial practices. It is the responsibility of everyone to advocate and decolonize colonial policies and beliefs that contributed and continue to contribute to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care.

SIXTIES SCOOP

“The sixties scoop refers to the time period, primarily throughout the 1960’s when Indigenous children were taken or “scooped away” from their birth families and communities, usually without the consent from their families and band (Baswan & Yenilmez, n.d.). The term derives from a British Columbia social worker who discussed the common practice to “scoop” Indigenous children out of their homes. Between 1951 and 1984, it has been estimated that approximately 20,000 or more First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were taken by child welfare authorities and placed into non-Indigenous homes (University of British Columbia, n.d.). The sixties scoop is just one example of the many racist and harmful policies placed on Indigenous children and families. With the residential school system, the sixties scoop was an addition made by the government to extend such racist policies against Indigenous communities, which were meant to assimilate Indigenous children into Western society while stripping them of their culture and communities (Baswan & Yenilmez, n.d.).

In 1951, a revision to the federal Indian Act was made for provincial child welfare agencies to extend their reach into Indigenous communities (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2011). Section 88 of the Indian Act essentially provides provinces the ability to administer child welfare services to those outside of their jurisdiction (Bennett, 2001, as cited in Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2011). The provincial government was now able to ensure general provincial laws onto Indigenous Peoples, giving the provincial government full authority over Indigenous child welfare, which led to the removal of thousands of Indigenous children from their homes and communities. The impact of the sixties scoop left survivors facing a number of challenges. Survivors have experienced a loss of cultural identity and connection to family and community, which has led to feelings of isolation and confusion. Additionally, children were separated from their siblings and often placed in different provinces or even different countries. Survivors of the sixties scoop have also reported suffering physical, emotional, and sexual abuse from the families they were placed with (Baswan & Yenilmez, n.d).

By the mid 1960s, the number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system was over 50 times more than it had been in the 1950s (Baswan & Yenilmez, n.d.). With revisions made to the Indian Act, Indigenous communities had no control over child welfare policies or practices, allowing Western colonial standards and beliefs to be forced onto Indigenous children. Throughout the 1960s and onwards, Indigenous children were taken from their families and communities and were adopted into predominantly white, middle-class families throughout North America. Even if the children were placed in caring homes, many survivors still felt a lack of belonging as non-Indigenous families were not provided culturally specific education and experiences to form healthy Indigenous identities (Baswan & Yenilmez, n.d). As the residential school system began to fade as the government's main assimilation practice, the placement of Indigenous children in non-Indigenous families was a new and effective way to assimilate Indigenous children into the Western colonial society. Qualitative reports found that Indigenous adoptees into non-family member households during the sixties scoop described experiencing loss of identity and culture, social exclusion, abuse, feelings of cultural shame and disconnection as well as substance use, mental health problems, homelessness, and incarceration (McQuaid et al., 2022).

IDEOLOGIES AND BELEIFS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN CARE

The racialized stereotypes and stigma against Indigenous peoples and families has undoubtedly contributed to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care. From the beginning of European colonization, the dominant colonial ideology has created a racialized hierarchy in which Indigenous peoples continue to be “othered” by settler groups. This exclusion and rejection of Indigenous Peoples by settler groups is an attempt to rationalize colonial actions that disadvantage, oppress, and ultimately harm them (Loppie et al., 2014).

The stereotypes against Indigenous Peoples stem from a place of power and privilege in settler colonialism. Through colonial power, racism has been able to manifest in ways that allow some groups of people to see themselves as superior to others and to claim and maintain forms of political, sociocultural, and economic power (Loppie et al., 2014). It is this power and superiority of colonial frameworks that deem Indigenous families ‘unfit’ to care for their own children. This power not only degrades Indigenous Peoples and their legitimate right to be self determining, but it has damaged the self-concept of generations of people who unfortunately, at times, internalize such demeaning stereotypes (Loppie et al., 2014).

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Indigenous children are still overrepresented in the child welfare system today. The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care appears to be related to a combination of factors that reflect the multiple systemic oppressions experienced by Indigenous families (Trocmé et al., 2004). “In recent years, there has been a significant push from Indigenous leaders and child welfare advocates across the country to address the myriad systemic issues contributing to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care” (Hobson, 2022). The government has started to make small positive strides within the child welfare system, starting with the inclusion of Indigenous approaches to wellbeing and relevant cultural practices for children in care. Another promising approach to this inclusion is the recent agreement among the federal and provincial governments and three Alberta First Nation's in implementing Awaśak Wiyasiwêwin giving back control of child welfare to First Nation's communities (Derworiz, 2023).

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Educating social workers and children services on Indigenous kinship and family practices and decolonizing the Western view of the family unit will surely help address misconceptions around Indigenous family practices. Growing Indigenous child welfare services to give back this sovereignty to Indigenous Peoples and having a governing body that oversees child and family services from an Indigenous worldview. Keeping Indigenous children with their families, extended family, and within their communities when possible and safe to do so will prevent the loss or disconnection to their culture. Lastly, advocating for more Indigenous foster families within children services helps children maintain a healthy connection to their Indigenous culture.

ABOUT MACKENZIE DACHUK

Mackenzie is currently in her third year of the Bachelor of Social Work program at MacEwan University and is completing her practicum with the Edmonton Social Planning Council. She has a passion for helping others and empowering them in achieving their goals. Mackenzie is Métis from Treaty 8 Territory and plays hockey for the MacEwan women's hockey team. She enjoys sports, travel, and connecting with the community.

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