

**Envisioning Indigenous Social Work: A Critical Reflection of a Non-Indigenous
Indigenous Social Worker**

原住民社會工作的想像：一個非原住民社會工作者的批判性反思

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中文摘要

長久以來，原住民傳統的價值和社會體制受到殖民化的影響，在經濟、政治、文化與社會的主流架構下被邊緣化(marginalized)與排除(excluded)。而社會工作，作為一個緣起於西方哲學的助人專業，對於原住民的介入和服務策略的脈絡有相當強烈的社會控制意涵(Sinclair, 2009)。即使社會工作者秉持善念(a good will)，希望以專業的助人技術和方法改善原住民的生活困境，但缺乏對殖民政權所形塑的結構性和制度性壓迫進行批判，以及忽略西方社會工作專業與原住民社會的價值和權力衝突，社會工作者往往是扮演著壓迫者(oppressor)的角色，而非社會所期待的助人者(Baikie, 2009; Blackstock, 2009)。本文的論述基礎，建立於一個非原住民社會工作者進入原住民社會服務領域後，如何透過自我察覺和反饋，以及學習與工作經驗和理論不斷對話的過程，從而歸納出四個原住民社會工作的關鍵要素：建立關係(making connections)、持續性學習(ongoing learning)、批判性的自我察覺(critical self-reflection)、賦權(empowerment)。雖然本文的理論概念和作者本身的經驗主要依循著加拿大原住民社會工作的發展脈絡，但誠如 Baskin(2011: 245)強調，在原住民的世界觀裡，我們彼此都是互相連結著(we are all related)，作者希望藉由自身學習與工作經驗的分享，拓展台灣對原住民社會工作的想像。

關鍵字：原住民社會工作、反壓迫社會工作、批判性自我察覺、賦權

Abstract

For long, the traditional values and societal institution of Indigenous peoples have been marginalized and excluded by the mainstream society on economic, political, cultural and social levels under colonization. Social work as a helping profession stemmed from Western ideologies, has its rigid implications and manifestation of social control upon the interventional approaches to Indigenous people (Sinclair, 2009). Despite a good will upheld by the social workers who are committed to helping Indigenous people, with a lack of acknowledgement of colonial oppression and ignorance of the values and power conflicts between social work professionalism and Indigenous people, social workers are most likely becoming an oppressor rather than a real helper (Baikie, 2009; Blackstock, 2009). This article is a critical self-reflection, as well as an internal dialogue among theories, and learning and working experience of a non-Indigenous social worker. This article highlights four crucial components of Indigenous social work practice: making connections, ongoing learning, critical self-reflection, and empowerment. While this article is mostly founded on the Canadian context with respect to Indigenous social work, yet as Baskin (2011) notes, “In an Indigenous perspective, we are all related” (p.245). The author aspires to the prospect that this article would expand the understandings of Indigenous social in Taiwan.

Keywords: Indigenous social work, anti-oppressive social work, self-reflection, empowerment

In 2010, I began my social work career in a mountainously rural Atayal¹ village in Hsinchu County in Taiwan. As a non-Indigenous social worker of Han-Chinese descent, it was not the first time I encountered a Taiwanese Indigenous culture, yet it was the first time that I was immersed in it because I had to live in this community during the week. During that time, I found out that the more I knew about these people, the more I realized my ignorance of who they really were and how they were economically, historically, culturally and socially marginalized by the mainstream society of Taiwan. In particular, I was wondering how and why my own socio-economic background as an ethnical majority in Taiwan and my social work training had created different definitions of wellbeing and interpretations of the issues, challenges and reality of this community.

Meanwhile, as the social work profession in Taiwan emphasizes the adoption of traditionally and locally cultural values and knowledge into practice, the integration of Indigenous knowledge into social work practice is still ignored. Even though Atayal people have different cultural beliefs, values and social systems from the majority of Taiwanese people, namely a mixture of Chinese descent and colonial Japanese heritage, the familial and communal support systems based upon ancestral Atayal teachings and laws, ‘Gaga’, have become marginalized, invalidated and invisible in contemporary social work practice in

¹ Atayal is one of the sixteen officially recognized tribes of indigenous people in Taiwan.

Taiwan. Therefore, I decided to come to Canada in 2011 to advance my understanding and knowledge in Indigenous social work.

This article primarily presents a critical reflection of my practicum learning experience as a non-Indigenous and foreign social work student. The placement took place at the Aboriginal Family Service Centre in Regina from September and December, 2014, as a partial requirement for the social work graduate program of the University of Regina. This article highlights four crucial components in working with Indigenous people stemming from my hands-on experience and literature reviews: making connections, ongoing learning, critical self-reflection, and empowerment. These components mostly conform to an anti-oppressive stance and Indigenous perspectives.

Making Connections

Building relationships is a crucial component of social work practice, yet the ideology, presumptions, and approaches to initiating and maintaining an effective working relationship with clients will vary from one practitioner to another (Egan, 2010). Encounters with the social work profession and Indigenous people in Canada were not always positive and productive in the past (RCAP, 1996; Green & Thomas, 2009; Sinclair, 2009), thus developing a working relationship with Indigenous people needs to be specifically considered.

To recall my early social work career in Taiwan, the most common question that I was asked from community members and clients was why I wanted to work in a rural Indigenous community. There was also a curiosity about why I, as a social worker as well as being an ethnic majority person in Taiwan, wanted to work and live in this community with poorer living conditions and a lower salary. Likewise, during my placement, I have been constantly asked similar questions by my colleagues and clients. “Why are you interested in working with Indigenous people?” “Are you Indigenous back in Taiwan?” “How and what do you know about Indigenous people in Canada?” Consequently, I had to tell my story over and over again. However, I understood that answering these questions is beneficial for me to build working relationships with my colleagues and clients in several ways.

First of all, in an Indigenous perspective, articulating who I am and where I am from is a significant initial step to develop relationships with Indigenous people (Absolon, 2009; Baskin, 2011; Ross, 2014). My self-disclosure was always helpful to seek connections with my colleagues and clients in this placement. Often when I shared my personal story with my colleagues and clients, we were able to discover the similarities that we shared such as cultural beliefs, discriminated experiences or stereotypes against us. With the process of seeking connections between my clients and myself, both of us realized our relationship would tend to be mutually respectful because we were connected to some extent despite our differences. Moreover, to achieve sound working relationships with Indigenous people, I did

not only need to learn about the client's story, but I also needed to invite the client to learn about me as a helper and as a person. By doing this, the working relationships between my clients and me were more likely perceived as equal and reciprocal rather than a one-way approach.

Another lesson I learned in developing working relationships with Indigenous people is being visible in the community. In particular, Indigenous people have a very strong sense of connectedness to community, and a very close tie to personal and family networks that are intertwined through the concepts of extended family, kinship and clan system; to be known within the client's social network and community is important (McKenzie, 2002). On the other hand, Absolon (2009) notes that having "multi-layered relationships" (p.188) in the community is not only beneficial to learn about the people and the culture, but also helpful to develop a sense of mutual trusty and respect between the worker and community members. Therefore, to be known and be familiar in my role as a helper by the community became one of my primary objectives in developing relationships with Indigenous people. During this placement, I consistently showed my interests and willingness to engage in cultural events or day-to-day activities happening in the neighbourhood or in other Indigenous communities in or away from the city. I was hoping the community realized the reasons that I was here were not to "work for" the community as someone who was not willing to engage in their lives

outside of work duties, but to “work with” the community and to “learn from” the community as someone who was willing to be a part of this community just like the other residents.

Ongoing Learning

Prior to the placement, I thought a way to provide appropriate services for Indigenous people was to advance my cultural competence. Nevertheless, cultural competence models in working with Indigenous people also did not indicate how much knowledge and understanding of the Indigenous culture and reality I needed to have in order to be competent. Jeffery (2009) also argues that cultural competence models do not answer “what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts” (p.46). On the other hand, the emphasis on attempting to become culturally competent may entrench a set of simplified and generalized attributes of Indigenous issues from the predominant perspective by seeing cultural difference as the only barrier in effectively working with Indigenous people, instead of critically examining structural and institutional oppression upon Indigenous people (Sakamoto, 2007; Blackstock, 2009; Baskin, 2011). Consequently, I adopted the idea of maintaining an awareness of “not-knowing” and “incompetence” (Dean, 2001, p.628) that manifests my respectful and open-minded attitudes towards learning from Indigenous people.

Being willing to learn from Indigenous people were helpful to resolve my concerns of the competence in professional practice in this placement. My concerns primarily came from my personal background and limited living experience in Canada. I understood that my social

work education in Taiwan adopted many theoretical concepts and models from Western literature, but how to transition my social work knowledge and skills into Canada's context somehow remained concerning me. Also, my limited living experience in Canada at times were worrisome to me with regard to my abilities to assist my clients with everyday life such as applying for a phone number, dealing with Social Services, banking and so forth.

Nevertheless, I found that most of the people I worked with in this placement had positive feedback for me regarding my efforts and willingness to ask and learn. At times, I believed that my clients felt more positive towards themselves when they realized that they possessed the strengths and knowledge that I did not have.

.As Castellano, Stalwick and Wien (1986) articulate, "Insight and appreciation come only with observation and experience" (p.172). Participating in traditional Indigenous ways of helping deemed as a way to expand my learning experience. One specific Indigenous helping method that I participated in was a sharing circle held by All Nations Hope located in the North Central community. From this experience, I learn that the practice of a sharing circle is a way to seek internal peace and harmony through smudging, praying, listening, sharing, and introspection, as well as to connect with other participants to create a sense of care and belonging of the group (Hart, 2002). In the sharing circle, participants should pay full attention with a respectful attitude to who is speaking. The take-turn-communication style also allowed me not only to enter the reality of the person who was sharing, but to

initiate an internal dialogue for me to reflect and to echo my reflections with what each person said. Because of this communication style and my internal dialogue and reflections, I felt a sense of connection with the participants in this circle. At a certain point in this circle, I became very emotional for no reason and I was not able to describe the feelings; I just accepted the emotional reaction instead of denying it. When we were asked to give each other a hug at the end of the circle, my emotion was gone because I felt a warm energy filling me from the other participants. Unlike social work group work that mostly implies the notions of a therapeutic relationship, this circle was focussed more on addressing self-resilience and harmony within a mutually respectful and supportive environment. By connecting our internal voice with external environments, the focus of therapeutic perspectives is directed toward healing and self-resiliency (Hart, 2002).

Upholding a respectful and humble attitude of ongoing learning was also helpful to prevent me from cultural appropriation of Indigenous cultures (Hart, 2009; Baskin, 2011). Particularly given the diversity of Indigenous cultures, the knowledge and culturally relevant services should be grounded within the local context where the social worker serves, and / or should be appropriate to the client's heritage and identity (Weaver, 1999; Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2007). The caution of preventing cultural appropriation came to me when I was preparing a presentation for my colleagues to share an Indigenous perspective of social work practice at the university. I coloured the medicine wheel with white, yellow, red and black.

My colleague later told me that the medicine wheel in Cree was not coloured with black but with blue, and the position of each quadrant was different from what I learned from books.

This incidence reminds me to be cautious about whether or not my knowledge about Indigenous perspectives is accurate, or to credit where my understandings come from before I present these ideas.

Critical Self-Reflection

Social work is not a culturally neutral profession. Rather, every social worker has their own beliefs and perspectives that reflect his or her cultural background and social work profession training ingrained in a Euro-western perspective (Sakamoto, 2007; Baikie, 2009; Baskin, 2011). At times, social workers enter people's lives upholding a good will to help and acting as a helping expert, but fail to examine how the roles of social worker would possibly oppress the people who they are working with (Blockstock, 2009). Consistent critical self-reflections of social workers' value bases, beliefs, social status and standpoint are therefore necessary to detect and prevent the imposition of potentially adverse values and interventions (Sakamoto & Pinter, 2005). In my case, although I was always aware of how cultural background and socio-economic status would have contributed to differences with Indigenous people, much of my practice and perceptions of Indigenous social issues were still informed by my cultural background and life experiences in Taiwanese as well as social work education that primarily derives from Euro-western ideologies. In addition, my legal

obligations complying with the professional social work code of ethics and relative legislation have authorized me as a social worker to forcibly intrude into the client's life and family regardless of my personal will. Practicing critical self-reflections, revealing my roles as a social worker and engaging clients into a discussion about the potential factors of imbalanced power status between us are imperative to create a positive working process based on equality and respect (Sakamoto, 2007; Thomas & Green, 2007).

Practicing critical self-reflection is also an essential component in response to culturally sensitive or culturally competent social work practice (Sakamoto, 2007). While contemporary social work profession strives to learning about "other's" culture in cross-cultural services, less emphasises are given to learning about social workers' own cultural and ethical background (Baikie, 2009; Jeffery, 2009; Pon, 2009). The emphases on being cultural competent sometimes suppress social workers' intention to intervene in certain circumstances because they are afraid of being culturally biased, and endanger the people and family who are actually in needs of protection (Maiter, 2009). Baikie (2009) suggests, "Indigenous social workers bring other legitimate collective ways-of-knowing and social helping to their practice environments based on their worldviews, which includes their cultural knowledge base and their individual and collective practice knowledge as social helpers" (p.46). Critical self-reflecting of how social workers' own knowledge, whether personal or professional, is compatible to Indigenous people who they are working with thus

echoes this statement. According to Thompson (2012), “differences between people can and should be seen as assets to be appreciated, rather than problems to be solved’ (p.5). Being culturally competent does not necessarily mean that social work practitioners need to deny or abandon their own cultural identity and practices. Rather, it encourages workers to bring their own perspectives and to develop working alliances with Indigenous people that is founded on mutual respect and appreciation of diversity of knowledges (Weaver, 1999).

Empowerment

The orientation of empowerment is to assist Indigenous people to reclaim their inherent power and rights to control their own lives. The most crucial approach to empowerment is to ensure that Indigenous voices are heard and adopted into policies and practice accordingly (Dumbrill & Lo, 2009; Pringle, Cameron, Durocher & Skelton, 2010).

As Sinclair (2004) notes,

A culture of silence exists where the oppressed [Indigenous people] are not heard, and where a lack of knowledge about their contexts creates a high risk for the perpetuation of racism, discrimination and an ethic of ‘blaming the victim’ for their own situation (p.52).

Learning the reality of Indigenous social issues, the legacy of colonialization and residential schools, and structural marginalization and oppression through a set of Indigenous lens is a cornerstone for social work practice to address social justice and the Indigenous human rights

specifically endorsed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2008). Taking an empowerment stance also “enables us [social workers] to move away from pathologizing individuals to increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individual can take action to improve their life situation” (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006, p.113).

In my experience, at times social workers are overwhelmingly concerned about the urgent needs of the clients, but pay less attentions to structural factors obstructing the clients' opportunities to access appropriate resources and services that really make a fundamental change. This reflection came to me because of an incidence in this placement. I was assigned to a youth client for the mentoring program, which was a contracting-out case from the Ministry. I was not able to meet my client on the appointed date because my client ran away the night before. The group home worker told me that my client was not adjusting well, and was displaying some aggressive behaviour and unstable emotions; and my client made a poor decision to run away. However, it was understandable that my client had adaptive issues, as Feduniw (2009) identifies certain challenges for Indigenous youths in care including transience, emotional reactions, and loss the ties with their original family and community. Accordingly, I perceived that running away was a natural reaction when there was no immediate and intensive support to help my client go through the process, rather than being simply a poor decision. At that time, I was also thinking what could have the Ministry and the group home done differently for Indigenous children and youths. This was not to judge

whether the Ministry has done the best to serve this youth. I just wondered whether the Ministry could have prevented this incidence by adopting Indigenous ways of helping instead of apprehension and placement. This incidence also reminded me that when we as a social worker start to interpret Indigenous social issues through the lens of the people who are struggling and suffering, we would more likely to undertake different intervention approaches that are more reflective of the reality and needs of Indigenous people.

Most importantly, empowerment-oriented social work practice acknowledges that the client is the expert in understanding their own needs and the client has right to determine the ways to satisfy these needs and achieve their full potentials (Dean, 2001; Hurdle, 2002; Dumbrill & Lo, 2009). This acknowledgement should apply not only to each individual client, but also to the family, community and nation of Indigenous people (Baskin, 2011). Social workers should not overlook how Indigenous people as a minority group was and is marginalized and oppressed, and is deprived their rights to self-determination and self-sufficiency by the mentality of colonization. According to Hart (2009), the premises of combating colonization and oppression are self-sufficiency and reorganization. Facilitating community development in alliance with political, economic, educational, health and other institutions is therefore a considerable mandate social workers beyond direct and individual practice in working with Indigenous people.

Conclusion

As this article has highlights four crucial components of indigenous social work practice based on my experiences and reflections, I suggest the readers to adopt an Indigenous worldview that believes “everything is interwoven into the whole” (Baskin, 2011, p.85), and to incorporate all of these components into practice instead of applying each component separately. Without making connections, ongoing learning and critical reflections, social workers would find it challenging to develop a positive and meaningful working alliance with Indigenous people. Likewise, without specific considerations of historical and structural oppression and learning the reality through an Indigenous lens, it is inconceivable for social workers to make a fundamental change of Indigenous people’s lives.

On the other hand, my experience of working with Indigenous people has raised my concerns and interest of redefining the legitimacy of knowledge and skills in professional helping. While Euro-western values have great impacts on social work professionalism, many Indigenous scholars (i.e. Baikies, 2009; Baskin, 2011) are arguing that Indigenous perspectives have much to inform the social work profession. Undertaking the reconceptualization and reconstruction of “legitimate” knowledge, perspectives and skills in professional services is therefore an appealing discourse in social work. Nevertheless, the less explainable ways of helping ingrained in the cultures other than the mainstream one and learned from daily life and experiences remain excluded in the profession (Baskin, 2011). I

hope this article that is based on my understandings and experience would make a contribution to the profession by bringing a different way of knowing of Indigenous social work. Also, as the process of legitimatizing knowledge of social work is inevitably pertaining to power, I think Indigenous social workers and scholars should also empower themselves within the profession. As an ally, I would be continuously working on advocating and empowering Indigenous perspectives of helping within the social work profession.

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