Canadian Social Work Review
Revue canadienne de service social

IMPLICATED SUBJECTS: SOCIAL WORKERS, SETTLER COLONIALISM, AND THE QUEST FOR NON-INNOCENCE

Jill Hoselton

Volume 41, Number 1, 2024

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111863ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1111863ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for Social Work Education / Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS)

ISSN

2369-5757 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Hoselton, J. (2024). IMPLICATED SUBJECTS: SOCIAL WORKERS, SETTLER COLONIALISM, AND THE QUEST FOR NON-INNOCENCE. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social*, *41*(1), 113–132. https://doi.org/10.7202/1111863ar

Article abstract

Drawing from Michael Rothberg's (2019) concept of the "implicated subject," this paper examines Canadian social work's implication in settler colonialism from past to present through its role in Indigenous child removal from the Indian Residential Schools to the Sixties Scoop and contemporary child welfare. The "implicated subject" untangles social work from dominant discourses that position social workers as morally superior, innocent, and good, which prevents practitioners from seeing how their professional role perpetuates unintentional harm towards service-users. A practice of non-innocence is proposed, which centres the development of a critical consciousness among social workers regarding the profession's implication in historical and contemporary harm towards Indigenous Peoples (and other marginalized populations) by way of settler colonial practices. This awareness positions practitioners as political actors with a responsibility to engage in political action dedicated towards social justice.

IMPLICATED SUBJECTS: SOCIAL WORKERS, SETTLER COLONIALISM, AND THE QUEST FOR NON-INNOCENCE

Jill Hoselton

Abstract: Drawing from Michael Rothberg's (2019) concept of the "implicated subject," this paper examines Canadian social work's implication in settler colonialism from past to present through its role in Indigenous child removal from the Indian Residential Schools to the Sixties Scoop and contemporary child welfare. The "implicated subject" untangles social work from dominant discourses that position social workers as morally superior, innocent, and good, which prevents practitioners from seeing how their professional role perpetuates unintentional harm towards service-users. A practice of non-innocence is proposed, which centres the development of a critical consciousness among social workers regarding the profession's implication in historical and contemporary harm towards Indigenous Peoples (and other marginalized populations) by way of settler colonial practices. This awareness positions practitioners as political actors with a responsibility to engage in political action dedicated towards social justice.

Key words: Implication; implicated subjects; settler colonialism; social work practice; innocence/non-innocence

Résumé : S'appuyant sur le concept de « sujet impliqué » de Michael Rothberg (2019), cet article examine l'implication du travail social canadien dans le colonialisme de peuplement du passé au présent à travers son rôle dans le retrait des enfants autochtones des pensionnats indiens jusqu'à la rafle des années 1960, jusqu'au bien-être de l'enfance contemporaine. Le « sujet impliqué » démêle le travail social des discours dominants qui positionnent les travailleurs sociaux comme moralement supérieurs, innocents et bons, ce qui empêche les praticiens de voir

Jill Hoselton is a PhD student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary

Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 41, Number 1 (2024) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 41, numéro 1 (2024)

comment leur rôle professionnel perpétue un préjudice involontaire envers les utilisateurs des services. Une pratique de non-innocence est proposée, qui centre le développement d'une conscience critique parmi les travailleurs sociaux concernant l'implication de la profession dans les dommages historiques et contemporains causés aux peuples autochtones (et autres populations marginalisées) par le biais de pratiques coloniales. Cette prise de conscience positionne les praticiens comme des acteurs politiques ayant la responsabilité de s'engager dans une action politique dédiée à la justice sociale.

Mots-clés : Implication; sujets impliqués; le colonialisme de peuplement; pratique du travail social; innocence/non-innocence

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A special thanks to Dr. Susanne Luhmann, Professor at the University of Alberta, Department of Women's and Gender Studies, whose teaching and mentorship critically and meaningfully expanded the ways I think about ethics as a social worker, emerging researcher, and activist.

LITTLE SOCIAL WORK SCHOLARSHIP IN NORTH AMERICA has attended to the role the profession has played and continues to play in upholding and implementing settler colonialism (Bubar et al., 2022; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Wong, 2019; Johnstone, 2018; Landertinger, 2021; Lee & Ferrer, 2014; McKenzie et al., 2016; Morgenshtern et al., 2022). As a white settler and previous frontline child welfare social worker I became aware of social work's implication in perpetuating harms that were rooted in settler colonial ideas and practices. As an emerging social work researcher and PhD student, my research aims are directed towards the following questions: how has Canadian social work reckoned with its past and current implication in settler colonialism? And, what can settler social workers do to shift their practice towards disrupting settler colonialism and minimizing harm towards service-users?

To answer these questions, I turn to Michael Rothberg's *Implicated Subject* (2019) as a conceptual framework to grapple with how social work has been and continues to be implicated in the violence that is settler colonialism. I first situate Canadian nation-building as a settler colonial project. Doing so sets the stage for identifying the emergence of professional social work as a key technology of settler colonialism. I then review the social work literature that explores the profession's implication in settler colonialism and systems of oppression. This literature review reveals a crucial gap: the absence of practice strategies to address these challenges, which this conceptual article aims to provide. To demonstrate the relevance and use of the implicated subject, I review the three distinct

phases of Indigenous child removal in Canada as case examples: the Indian Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and child welfare. I draw on the implicated subject to analyze these critical junctures, shedding light on key insights that I use to formulate what I call 'practices of non-innocence.' This innovative practice approach supports decolonizing efforts in social work and is well suited for the settler practitioner who is interested in disrupting social work's implication in settler colonialism and preventing or minimizing harm to service-users.

Introducing Implication

Definition

"Implication" is the central term of the recent scholarly work by Rothberg (2019). A professor of English and Comparative Literature and the 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, Rothberg has been influential in the scholarly fields of memory studies, postcolonial studies, and genocide and Holocaust studies (Knittel & Forchieri, 2020). His most recent work on implication "sets out to expand the way we think and talk about political violence and injustice by offering a new critical term: the implicated subject" (Knittel & Forchieri, 2020, p. 3). Rothberg (2019) suggests that the implicated subject illuminates the complex and contradictory arrangements of how implication is mobilized in historical and contemporary injustices.

Proposing that collective society's "understanding of power, privilege, violence, and injustice suffers from an underdeveloped vocabulary" (p. 1), Rothberg (2019) asserts that the "'implicated subject' and the related notion of 'implication'" address the "manifold indirect, structural, and collective forms of agency that enable injury, exploitation, and domination but that frequently remain in the shadows" (p. 1). Implicated subjects are not direct agents of harm, but due to their alignment with power and privilege, "contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination" (p. 1). Rothberg (2019) suggests that implicated subjects, while not directly perpetrators, are not passive bystanders either. Instead, he asserts that being an implicated subject means that one — indirectly or belatedly, through action or inaction — helps to "produce or reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators" (p. 1).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Rothberg's (2019) scholarship on implication draws upon extensive research in the areas of victimhood, perpetration, responsibility, and memory, primarily as they relate to Holocaust and genocidal studies. Drawing from the writings of Holocaust survivor Primo Levi (2017), Rothberg (2019) describes what Levi referred to as the "gray zone." In the context of the Holocaust, the gray zone disrupts the binary of victims

and perpetrators, good guys and bad guys, illuminating the ways in which victims of the Holocaust became complicit in their own victimization. Specifically, Levi (2017) discusses how victims of the Holocaust were also the workforce of the genocidal camps, blurring "distinctions that have buttressed simplified understandings of the Nazi era" (Rothberg, 2019, p. 39). Rothberg (2019) asserts:

> To understand the gray zone is to understand that the process of victimization in the camps does not only produce victims who are clearly set against perpetrators, but, in addition, creates a whole cast of characters marked by shades or degrees of complicity who are not easy to place on either moral or juridical maps. In breaking with stereotypical notions of 'innocent victim,' the gray zone troubles not only conventional morality but also legal judgement and historical understanding. (p. 39)

Mihai (2019) provides a useful application of the gray zone. But instead of exemplifying how victims are complicit in their own victimization, she demonstrates how everyday citizens become complicit in the oppression of others. While Rothberg (2019) distinguishes complicity from implication, seeing complicity as a legal term used in proximation to criminal guilt, Mihai's (2019) conception of complicity offers a more nuanced application and is closely aligned with Rothberg's (2019) notion of implication. Mihai (2019) uses the German occupation of France (1940–1944), which was rooted in antisemitic ideology, to demonstrate the various iterations of complicity enacted by the everyday French citizen. Seeing complicity as a spectrum, Mihai (2019) discusses three types of complicitous actors: collaborators, bystanders, and resistors.

For the purposes of illuminating the gray zone, I discuss the role of bystanders, as described by Mihai (2019). Bystanders in the German occupation of France were, for example, French citizens who applied for jobs within the "repressive state apparatus" (p. 513). Many employees fell into the category of "bureaucratic proletariat" (p. 513), which were those French citizens who had worked in underpaid often temporary government positions prior to the German occupation. These jobs were discontinued by the German government and, in response, the low-paid French citizens applied to the German commissariat, which was seen as an ordinary institution. While outsiders may have perceived the French citizens employed by the German commissariat as ideologically aligned with the antisemitic views of the German occupiers, in reality, only 10% of the French employees were found to be antisemitic. This example highlights the social and temporal dimensions that shape complicity. French citizens at large did not work for the German occupation because they aligned with the occupier's ideology, but because they needed employment to support their livelihoods.

The implicated subject is a useful conceptual framework for addressing social work's failure to reckon with its troubled history, which is mired by its implication in settler colonialism (Ioakimidis &

Trimikliniotis, 2020). Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) propose that this failure most critically prevents social work professionals from considering their own legacies and shaping a future based on the lessons of the past. In consequence, social work and social workers continue to engage in complicitous practices that uphold settler colonialism. Rothberg's (2019) notion of the implicated subject offers a critical lens for social workers to grapple deeply with the profession's complicated past and provides hope for the profession not just to imagine itself as a site of social justice but rather to be a site of social justice (Badwall, 2014). The following sections conceptualize settler colonialism and social work's implication in it, including a review of literature that has examined social work's complicity in settler colonialism and systems of oppression.

Defining Settler Colonialism

To understand social work's historical and ongoing implication in settler colonialism, it is necessary to define settler colonialism. Anthropologist Patrick Wolfe (2006) describes the distinctiveness of settler colonialism, notable in the Canadian settler-state, as a "structure not an event" (p. 390). Political theorist Lorenzo Veracini (2010) elaborates further, cautioning that settler colonialism is both a distinct form of migration and unique iteration of colonialization, because settler-migrants arrive and then stay, establishing a settler society through the occupation and subjugation of the local Indigenous Peoples (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015; Simpson, 2011; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). This migration pattern contrasts with other forms of colonization, in which empires develop overseas colonies to garner further power through imperialist endeavors (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015). Simpson (2011) adds to the discussion on settler colonialism by describing it as an apocalyptic reality faced by Indigenous Peoples and communities who actively resisted the settler occupation and who are survivors of political and cultural genocide.

With these conceptions of settler colonialism in mind, my assertion that the profession of social work is implicated in in settler colonialism — both historically and contemporarily — is to say that social work had and has a direct role in the systematic and violent erasure of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The following section describes how the establishment of the Canadian settler state required the use of taxonomies to exalt the white settler subject (who was never the subject of categorization) and to denigrate Indigenous and Black subjects, amongst other populations (immigrants, people who are mentally ill or disabled, etc)[1]. Through the distinct subject positions that settler colonialism produced, the social work professional became an important tool of the government to uphold and maintain the power and control of the settler state.

Race Taxonomies, Settler Colonialism, and the Emergence of the Social Work Profession

According to Shotwell (2016), classification methods are "intimately biopolitical ... [and when these methods] work well, they become infrastructure — they fade out, we cannot easily perceive them, and the social relations they shape become commonsensical" (p. 26). In the most basic sense, classification as a technique of colonization in Canada divided the non-white settler population into categories to gain sovereignty over the people and the land, and to secure the settler state (Wolfe, 2006). The colonial system of classification in the Canadian context was a patriarchal, white supremacist, classist, and ableist project aimed at securing national identity (Heron, 2007; Thobani, 2007).

Arguably, the most salient form of Othering in Canada occurred against Indigenous and Black populations, whose absence and presence were both crucial for the 'making' of the nation. Indigenous Peoples were considered deeply threatening to nation-building due to their claims to the land. Subject to cultural and legal assimilation intended to destroy any markers that distinguished them as Indigenous and to revoke the legal rights and protections conferred through their Indian status, Indigenous People were faced with having to renounce their culture, identity, and land rights to receive the benefits of citizenship (Cannon, 2007; Jackson, 2002). The complexity of legal assimilation is beyond the scope of this article, but it is vital to understand that the legal measures that were enforced against Indigenous Peoples were deeply connected to Indigenous land dispossession, the cornerstone of nation-building.

Black people, in contrast to Indigenous People, were not a threat to settler colonialism, but instead were perceived as critical to the development of the settler-state. Maynard (2019) illuminates the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its implications for Black mobility. Specifically, she highlights how Black people only gained entry into Canada and the United States because of the "global positioning of Black life as enslaveable" (p. 127). Black people were not permitted to enter Canada as free people with rights to citizenship; instead, they only arrived in Canada due to mass kidnapping and trafficking, their physical labour a necessity for upholding European colonial settlements — specifically, New France and British North America, which formed the settler state of Canada (McKittrick, 2006). These distinct but related subjugations highlight how certain populations were subject to racial classification and how these taxonomies were a key apparatus of the settler-colonial state. However, these categorizations were not self-sustaining: they required ongoing management and regulation. The profession of social work was one of many technologies of settler colonialism that maintained the colonial logics of classification (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Johnstone, 2018; Thobani, 2007).

The above discourse runs contrary to the standard account of professional social work history (Fortier & Wong, 2018). The dominant story of social work focuses on the profession's emergence at the turn of the twentieth century (Johnstone, 2018). Conventionally, social work is depicted as an altruistic project, largely pursued by white, upper- and middle-class women who desired to help the poor and disenfranchised to cope with the impacts of industrialization, which had resulted in mass social upheaval and socio-economic challenges (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Fortier & Wong, 2018, Johnstone, 2018). However, critical social work scholarship traces early iterations of social work as far back as the 1763 Royal Proclamation, which established guidelines for the ongoing management of land and of displaced Indigenous populations (Fortier & Wong, 2018). Although the occupations that were responsible for managing Indigenous People were largely Christian missionaries or traders with the Hudson's Bay Company, the roles ascribed to these civil servants were precursors for professional social work that developed later. For example, traders and missionaries were expected to provide food relief to quell Indigenous resistance to land dispossession (Fortier & Wong, 2018). When the profession officially materialized in the early twentieth century, "settler colonial assumptions were pervasive, and white bourgeois power was established in a context of ideas and values around poverty, labor, class, race, gender, sexuality, and disability" (Johnstone, 2018). These values and ideas were transmitted through social work practice, and inevitably positioned social workers as helpers who were "advanced, civilized (and white) assisting those who were less advanced, uncivilized, and in the extreme savage" (Johnstone, 2018). This polarization between the helper and the helped sustained the classification technologies that were crucial for maintaining white settler society.

Postcolonial studies make visible the ways in which the colonial past seeps into the present (Gandhi, 2019; Ranto-Tyrkko, 2011). A postcolonial analysis of social work shows that the colonial past is reflected in contemporary social work education, professional regulations, and the subject positions of both social workers and clients (Pease, 2023). Additionally, these professional mechanisms thrust the social justice aims of social work onto the periphery, which in effect prevent social workers from engaging in subversive practices that would otherwise challenge the settler state's disciplinary functions that uphold settler futurity (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Futurity is distinct from future, encompassing a set of practices that that make the future knowable (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). In the context of settler colonialism, settler futurity refers to the assurance of the "continued and complete eradication of the original inhabitants of contested land" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 80). Therefore, professional social work is "fettered to settler futurity" (p. 80) through its ongoing implication in settler colonialism.

Social Work Grapples with Complicity

A growing body of Canadian social work literature examines social work complicity in settler colonialism and oppressive structures from past to present (Badwall, 2014; Blackstock, 2009; Chapman, 2014; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Heron, 2007; Hoselton, 2023; Jeffrey, 2005; Kelly & Chapman, 2015; Pease, 2023; Rossiter, 2001). The central themes that emerge from this literature include the paradoxical role of help and harm in social work practice, the experience of moral or ethical distress when aware of perpetuating harm, and the ways in which social workers rationalize harm. Critical social work literature suggests that harm perpetuated in social work is either rationalized or denied through discourses of professional social work as both innocent and good (Badwall, 2014; Blackstock, 2009; Chapman, 2014; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Hart, 2003; Heron, 2007; Hoselton, 2023; Kelly & Chapman, 2015; Rossiter, 2001). Kelly and Chapman (2015) suggest that the oppression that occurs through caring roles like social work is unlikely intentional and instead occurs despite good intentions. Good intentions among social workers often arise from a strong desire to help others, elucidated in autoethnographic accounts by Hart (2003) and Chapman (2014). These authors both express that they have experienced moral or ethical distress when faced with their own complicity in oppressive practices.

Certainly, large numbers of social workers face ethical or moral distress, as they find themselves stuck between the oppressive expectations of the institutions they work for and the desire to provide care to their clients based on values of justice (Reynolds, 2014; Weinberg, 2009). Weinberg (2009) provides a critique of moral distress. Relevant to the arguments presented in this article, she discusses how moral distress assumes an appropriate way of behaving. In other words, what moral distress implies is that the professional social worker knows the 'right thing' to do, and that factors outside the social worker's control prevent them from doing this 'right thing.' The concept of moral distress reinforces the dominant discourse that social workers are morally superior, contradicting the aims of this article to make visible the ways in which the moral elevation of social workers is a factor that underscores harm perpetuated against service-users. Weinberg (2009) aligns with this critique by drawing attention to the impossibility of doing the 'right thing' in social work, suggesting that, at times — regardless of an individual practitioner's stance — good and harm are possible outcomes.

Weinberg (2009) proposes a more nuanced concept — "ethical trespass" (p. 147) — which acknowledges the inevitability of harm, as opposed to a denial of harm in social work. Weinberg (2009) draws from Orlie's (1997) definition of ethical trespass as "the harmful effects ... that inevitably follow not from our intentions and malevolence but from our participation in social processes and identities" (p. 5). While certainly

much of the harm in social work is the result of bureaucracy and the systemic harms that extend from it, the implicated subject, when applied to social work's role in perpetuating harm, also shows how a practitioner's unexamined desires and intentions can risk causing harm.

In his autoethnography, Chapman (2014) moves beyond his experience of ethical distress, which arose when he used physical restraints on Indigenous children in a residential treatment facility. His analysis aims to examine how violent acts committed by caring professionals are normalized and rationalized. While Chapman (2014) initially experienced ethical distress over the physical restraints, he was required to enact in his role, and, over time, the rationalizations that he fostered in the institutional environment convinced him that restraints were an unfortunate but necessary part of the job. According to this discourse, the problems faced by the service-users are severed from their systemic roots and are instead positioned as the outcome of moral deficit, which can only be mitigated through the intervention of a social worker. While work like that of Chapman (2014) offers significant insights into the minds and hearts of social workers, the literature lacks an explicit practice approach that provides a pathway towards resisting settler colonialism and minimizing or eliminating harm.

Case Example: Social Work's Role in Indigenous Child Removal from Past to Present

Indigenous child removal, a key technology of settler colonialism, has been a cornerstone of social work in Canada. This practice leaves an indelible mark on social work's legacy in Canada. This state-sanctioned violence employed by social workers was and is exercised through three distinct phases: the residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and child welfare.

Residential School System

From 1846 to 1996, when the last residential school closed, Indigenous children were systematically removed from their families and communities and placed in Christian-run, state-supported schools (Blackstock, 2009; Thobani, 2007). Blackstock (2009) asserts that the schools were "designed to assimilate Indian children and thereby eliminate what senior government officials termed 'the Indian Problem'" (p. 29). Beyond the acute trauma of removing children from their families, the schools themselves were poorly constructed and were ripe environments to cultivate illnesses such as tuberculosis and smallpox (Blackstock, 2009). Additionally, neglect, deaths, and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse were reported to the federal government by Indian Agents, and both the federal government and the church, at the time, failed to change the violent conditions of the schools (Blackstock, 2009). Landertinger (2021)

cites that "more than 150,000 First Nations, *Métis,* and Inuit children had to attend an Indian Residential School, and, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), at least 6,000 children did not make it out alive" (p. 139). The statistics on child deaths are certainly underreported, given the 1800 additional unmarked graves that have been located across Canada since 2021 (Hessey, 2022).

Johnson (2019) emphasizes the focus on the "violent sexual abuse" of Indigenous children in the residential schools as a dominant criticism employed by the contemporary Canadian imagination and informed by Indigenous women's activism and survival civil suits against the churches and the government (p. 337). Johnson (2019), while not denying the significance of these atrocities, asserts that the emphasis on these particular acts simultaneously produces pathological monsters as perpetrators and exceptions within the broader residential school system. This narrative veils the responsibility of the well-intentioned white settlers — including social workers — who were deeply embedded in this settler colonial project. This counter-narrative, Johnson (2019) proposes, suggests that the perpetrators of harm in the residential school system were not the exception but in fact the rule, which in turn gives rise to the larger question of whether social workers should be more accurately named as perpetrators of Canada's past colonial violence as opposed to innocent bystanders.

This important critique is also illuminated by Blackstock (2009), who brings attention to the reality that social workers were actively involved in the placement of Indigenous children into residential schools and, further, that even social workers who practiced in other professional contexts were aware of the atrocities which were occurring in the schools, yet little evidence has been documented indicating any sort of resistance or action by social workers or any other human rights groups to disrupt these harms. While disproportionately (though not entirely) residential schools were phased out after the Second World War, "state-led apprehensions of Indigenous children did not end, but rather shifted and took a new form" (McKenzie et al., 2016, p.1). This phase of Indigenous child removal was named the Sixties Scoop, a term coined by Johnston (1983) to capture the unprecedented numbers of Indigenous children removed from their homes between 1960 and 1980 — removals that relied on racist and genocidal justifications.

The Sixties Scoop

In 1951, the St. Laurent government amended the Indian Act to transfer the responsibility of Indigenous child welfare from the federal to provincial governments (Sinclair, 2007). Federal transfer payments through the Canada Assistance Plan in 1966 resulted in a greater influx of resources into child welfare matters (Sinclair, 2007; 2016). This increase in

funding "translated into high numbers of relinquished and apprehended Aboriginal children and their subsequent placement in foster and adoptive homes" (Sinclair, 2007, p.10). By the 1970s, one in three Indigenous children were removed from their families (Sinclair, 2016).

The increased funding and subsequent investment of energy into child welfare during this period intersected with a host of other complexities that disadvantaged Indigenous communities encountering child welfare. These dynamics included a "relatively new social work profession, a clash between mainstream and Aboriginal cultures, social problems and disarray stemming from residential schools and intense poverty and disenfranchisement on reserves" (Sinclair, 2007, p. 10). Alston-O'Conner (2010) elucidates how many of the legal adoptions during this period also were unsuccessful. Indigenous children ran away from their adoptive homes, "turned to street life for support and experienced an overwhelming sense of lost identity" (p. 56). Many of the children struggled to attach to their adoptive parents, mired by distrust, which was compounded in many cases by physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Alston-O'Connor, 2010). Indigenous parents who lost their children suffered incredibly, experiencing alcoholism, low self-esteem, and emotional distress (Alston-O-Connor, 2010). Schmid and Morgenshtern (2022) highlight how, despite "immense resilience in the face of these eradication and assimilation efforts" (p. 148), severe intergenerational trauma plagues Indigenous communities.

Not dissimilar to the residential school system, child welfare social workers[2] were complicit in the cultural genocide and identity loss experienced by Indigenous People and communities that resulted from the Sixties Scoop (Alston-O'Connor, 2010). Sinclair (2016) cites the resistance of Indigenous political leaders who, in response to the mass apprehensions of Indigenous children, fought for the recognition of Indigenous child removal as genocide. Notably, a public inquiry into the mass adoption of Indigenous children was conducted in Manitoba, and a report was released in 1985. The report, written by Justice Edwin Kimelman (1985), decried that cultural genocide had been taking place both systematically and routinely. In response to the report, multiple provinces — starting with Manitoba — placed a moratorium on the adoption of Indigenous children by non-Indigenous parents. While one might consider genocide to be a sufficiently compelling reason to stop a particular practice, Indigenous child removal still occurs in Canada.

Child Welfare

Schmid & Morgenshtern (2021) assert that, in Canada, contemporary child welfare is foundationally shaped by the Anglophone child protection model, which bases intervention on identified safety concerns and corresponding risk assessments. Child removal is treated as a last resort

but remains a central practice in child welfare and frequently results in adversarial relations between the child welfare workers (i.e., social workers) and the families experiencing child welfare intervention (Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2021). Over the years, researchers have observed efforts to minimize the level of intrusion that child welfare workers administer in response to reported concerns. Additionally, the number of children, including Indigenous children, receiving intervention services has been reduced (Duthie et al., 2019; Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2021). However, Indigenous children remain overrepresented in the foster care system in Canada (Duthie et al., 2019; McKenzie et al., 2016; Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2021). The 2016 census indicates that 53.8% of children in foster care under age 14 are Indigenous, even though Indigenous children under the age of 14 represent only 7.7% of all children under 14 in Canada (Government of Canada, 2022).

The shocking — although not surprising — statistics that reflect the over-representation of Indigenous children in care is indicative of social work's continued implication in settler colonial practices. Landertinger's (2021) words underscore the significance of this ongoing implication. She states, "[b]y continuing the practice of Indigenous child removal, the child welfare system sustains the settler society's annihilative and accumulative impulses in the present, continuing to dispossess Indigenous [P]eoples of their lands and sovereignty" (p. 141). The oppression and harm perpetuated by social workers throughout the three phases of Indigenous child removal invites an important question: in a profession dedicated to helping and social justice, how is it that harm has and continues to be perpetuated against service-users?

The Implicated Subject and Indigenous Child Removal

Notably, Levi's (2017) conceptualization of the grey zone and Mihai's (2019) description of the bystander provides important insights into social work's historical and contemporary implication in Indigenous child removal. While I raised the question whether social workers might be most accurately labelled as perpetrators, the literature on implication considers the complexities surrounding the various subject positions that citizens take up in the face of violent governments or regimes. Although social workers are clearly implicated in the historical atrocities of settler colonialism in Canada, it is plausible that many social workers did not align with the settler-colonial agenda. As the reflections of Chapman (2014) and Hart (2003) suggest, it is possible that, historically, professional social workers desired to help and believed that the role of a social worker was a pathway to fulfill this desire. This assumption leads one to ask whether social workers involved with the residential schools experienced ethical distress about the very real instances of both helping and harming that occurred and if, like Chapman (2014), the dominant

discourses of social work being good, innocent, and — above all — morally superior enabled social workers to minimize and rationalize the harms being committed. This narrative offers a more nuanced portrayal of what social workers motivations were (and are) and how dangerous unexamined good intentions can be. This subject position disrupts the binary of perpetrator and victim that is frequently resorted to in discourses of historical atrocities. By moving beyond this limited binary, important insights are revealed that shed light on how social work practice needs to shift to prevent and minimize future harm.

From Implicated Subject to Politically Responsible Subject

The following discusses the utility of theorizing implication or the implicated subject. Rothberg (2019) and Shotwell (2016) both assert that seeing oneself as implicated calls for political engagement, because one shifts from a position of innocence to a position of responsibility. Rothberg (2019) provides the disclaimer that seeing oneself as implicated will not ease the burden of history, nor will it collapse systems of violence and oppression. Rothberg (2019) instead suggests that, when we acknowledge our implication, we refuse "violent innocence" (Tirado Bramen, 2017, p. 7). Inviting social workers to see their legacy as implicated in settler colonialism does not disappear the long history of Indigenous child removal, nor does it move social workers closer to a position of innocence.

Tirado Bramen (2017) draws on Bollas (1992), who describes violent innocence as "how violence is projected onto the other in order to protect oneself from acknowledging one's own capacity to be violent" (p. 7). This form of innocence is constitutive of the settler nation-state and exercised through social work, seen in the profession's perpetual disavowal of responsibility for violence and the continued projection of responsibility onto the Other. For example, Indigenous child removal was not simply executed without first deeply establishing discourses that justified the interventions. For example, McKenzie et al. (2016) discuss the colonial narratives that "framed residential schools as saving Indigenous children from unhealthy communities as well as vehicles for transforming these communities" (p. 4). This example demonstrates how particular subjects — and, for the purposes of this article, social workers, who were complicit in forcibly placing Indigenous children into residential schools — were able to deny their own violence by projecting responsibility for violence onto Indigenous Peoples and communities themselves by labeling them as unhealthy. Instead, social workers were able to position themselves as saviors, reifying social work's position of innocence.

Violent innocence is further entrenched into the fabric of the settler nation through "postcolonial amnesia" (Gandhi, 2019, p. 4), which is the

"desire to forget the colonial past" (Gandhi, 2019, p.4). Shotwell (2016) suggests that

> A central feature of white settler colonial subjectivity is forgetting; we live whiteness in part as active ignorance and forgetting. In situations where facts of the matter are routinely brought to our attention, forgetting must be an active and ongoing thing. (p. 37–38)

Drawing from Dixon's (2009) interview with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Shotwell (2016) proposes "unforgetting" (p. 36) as resistance to colonialism. Because forgetting or willful ignorance is critical for the sustainment of the colonial state, when we *unforget*, we unveil the ways in which the violent past informs the unjust present. Shotwell (2016) cautions that unforgetting is not simply consciousness raising work: it requires action to address the "vast apparatuses and histories that have immiseration for many people and profit for few" (p. 41). The purpose of reckoning with memory, or the absence of memory, she asserts, is to understand how society has been organized and "to craft a future different from the horrific past we have collectively inherited and differentially live in the present" (p. 41). Rothberg (2019) and Shotwell (2016) both emphasize implication and complicity as critical paradigms for social justice work and, by extension, for social justice –oriented social work. Rothberg (2019) sees implication as a refusal of settler-colonial scripts, which entrench systems of violence and oppression by developing critical consciousness. Shotwell (2016), on the other hand, moves beyond critical consciousness calling for political action to imagine alternative futures.

The Implicated Subject as a Pathway to Practicing from a Place of Non-Innocence

As discussed above, social workers have long upheld settler colonialism through pathologizing practices, such as Indigenous child removal, which is widely acknowledged as a genocidal act (Sinclair, 2016). Yet the concept of implication proposed by Rothberg (2019) can support social work practitioners to grapple with these various tensions by not just building awareness of the structural violence imposed onto clients by these systems — of which, arguably, most social workers are already aware (Reynolds, 2014) — but by perhaps altering the dominant social work paradigm that imagines social workers practicing from a place of innocence to practicing from a place of non-innocence or subversion (Rossiter, 2001). This practice approach aligns with decolonizing efforts made by Indigenous social work researchers (Khan & Absolon, 2021) and includes the following elements:

1. Awareness of the harms perpetuated by the social work profession historically.

2. Awareness that historical settler colonial systems and practices are not of the past but are here in the present and have simply shifted in their expression.
3. Acknowledgement that harm in social work practice is inevitable, and that it is vital to engage in dialogue about the potential to harm and the ways in which harm has been unintentionally perpetrated to find ways to refine one's practice to prevent and minimize harm going forward.
4. Engagement in critical dialogue and self-reflection about one's desire to help and the other good intentions that bring practitioners to the field of social work is crucial for understanding the ways in which one's intentions can be rooted in settler colonial, patriarchal, white supremacist scripts that reinforce systemic inequalities.
5. Based on continuous critical examinations of one's desires and intentions, construction of a new set of ethics and values to guide your practice. Keep amending and adapting these ethical guidelines as one learns from one's practice.
6. The development of a critical consciousness about social work's implication in settler colonialism which positions social workers as political actors with a responsibility to engage in political action dedicated to social justice.

As a white settler social worker previously practicing in the child welfare context, I deeply felt the harm perpetrated against service-users in my professional role and, over time, this led to me to return to school. On multiple occasions, I attempted to vocalize my experiences of ethical distress to supervisors and managers, but repeatedly my feelings were trivialized or dismissed. Retrospectively, I have also become aware of my own rationalizations of harm that occurred on the job. Chapman's (2014) words, "unfortunate but necessary" while maybe not precisely the rhetoric I used — ring true to my experience. At times, I felt heroic because I somehow circumvented the worst course of action I could have taken. Other times, I felt completely alone and filled with despair about the lack of choice I experienced, knowing that what was required of me would cause a kind of harm that would ripple through entire families and their future generations. Practices of non-innocence support decolonization, which Absolon (2019) describes as the

> process of restoring Indigenous Peoples' humanity by challenging Eurocentric dominance and narratives of history as well as the colonial erasure of Indigenous Peoples. Decolonizing is a divestment of colonial power over an individual, group, community, organization, or nation and the active recovering of one's authentic self and purpose. (p. 48)

My social work journey has taught me the many ways in which I have been dislocated from my authentic self and purpose. When we work in systems that require us to give up our authenticity, our values, and our ethics, we are no longer aligned with our purpose. I believe practices of non-innocence invite social workers to critically examine the origins and roots of their ethics, values, and intentions. Doing so increases awareness of how good intentions and the desire to help have been harnessed towards fulfilling the settler colonial agenda to assimilate Indigenous Peoples. This critical consciousness provides an opportunity for social workers to establish a personal and professional set of ethics, values, and intentions that are detached from problematic discourses and are instead grounded in authentic desire to support Indigenous sovereignty, decolonizing efforts, and meaningful social change.

NOTES

1. Other populations subject to oppression under settler colonialism will not be discussed, as the purpose of this paper is to explore the impacts of social work's implication in settler colonialism on Indigenous Peoples. The Othering of the Black population is necessary to highlight because their denigration through enslavement was also a major factor in Canadian nation-building, and this narrative is often concealed in mainstream discourses (McKittrick, 2006). Our focus on Indigenous Peoples throughout and our mention of Black people here does not to minimize the violence of settler colonialism on other populations, and this topic has been explored by other social work researchers (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Johnstone, 2018; Lee & Ferrer, 2014)
2. While a social work educational background is preferred for child welfare workers practicing in Canada, individuals with a variety of educational backgrounds combined with relevant work experience are considered sufficient for hiring (Zeidler, 2019). Statistics reflecting the numbers of social workers who fill child welfare roles are not available (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2018). As recently as 2019, social workers have advocated for stricter hiring practices that would require child welfare workers to have social work educational backgrounds due to the Code of Ethics that social workers are committed to and their overall higher standards of practice (Zeidler, 2019).

REFERENCES

Absolon, K. (2019). Reconnecting to Creation: A spirit of decolonizing. In N.J. Profitt & C. Baskin (Eds.), *Spirituality and social justice: Spirit in the political quest for a just world* (pp. 43–64). Canadian Scholars.

Alston-O'Connor, E. (2010). The Sixties Scoop: Implications for social workers and social work education. *Critical Social Work, 11*(1), 53–61. https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v11i1.5816

Badwall, H. (2014). Colonial encounters: Racialized social workers negotiating professional scripts of whiteness. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social*

Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice, 1(3), 1–23. https://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/IJ/article/view/996/1004

Battell Lowman, E., & Barker, A. J. (2015). *Settler identity and colonialism in the 21st century.* Fernwood Publishing.

Blackstock, C. (2009). The occasional evil of angels: Learning from the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and social work. *First Peoples Child & Family Review, 4*(1), 28–37. https://doi.org/10.7202/1069347ar

Bollas, C. (1992). *Being a character: Psychoanalysis and self experience.* Hill & Wang.

Bubar, R., Kelly, T., Souza, C., Lovato-Romero, L., & Bundy-Fazioli, K. (2022). Disrupting settler colonial microaggressions: Implications for social work. *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, 19*(2), 47–77. https://doi.org/10.55521/10-019-206

Cannon, M. (2007), Revisiting Histories of Legal Assimilation, Racialized Injustice, and the Future of Indian Status in Canada. *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International,* 97. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/97

Chapman, C. (2014). Becoming perpetrator: How I came to accept restraining and confining disabled Aboriginal children. In B. Burstow (Ed.), *Psychiatry disrupted: Theorizing resistance and crafting the (r)evolution* (pp. 16–33). McGill–Queen's University Press.

Chapman, C. & Withers, A. J. (2019). *A violent history of benevolence: Interlocking oppression in the moral economies of social working.* University of Toronto Press.

Dixon, C. (October 26, 2009). The opposite of truth is forgetting: An interview with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *Upping the Anti: A Journal for Theory and Action, 6.* https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/06-the-opposite-of-truth-is-forgetting

Duthie, D., Steinhauer, S., Twinn, C., Steinhauer, V., & Lonne, B. (2019). Understanding trauma and child maltreatment experienced in Indigenous communities. In B. Lonne, D. Scott, D. Higgins & T. I. Herrenkohl (Eds.), *Re-visioning public health approaches for protecting children* (pp. 327–347). Springer Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05858-6_20

Fortier, C., & Hon-Sing Wong, E. (2018). The settler colonialism of social work and the social work of settler colonialism. *Settler Colonial Studies, 9*(4), 437–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2018.1519962

Gandhi, L. (2019). *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Colombia University Press.

Government of Canada. (2022). *Reducing the number of Indigenous children in care.* https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1541187352297/1541187392851

Hart, M. (2003). Am I a modern-day missionary? Reflections of a Cree social worker. *School of Native Human Services, 5,* 299–313.

Heron, B. (2007). *Desire for development: Whiteness, gender, and the helping imperative.* Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Hessey, K. (October 22, 2022). *Naming the unknown: How First Nations are identifying the children buried in unmarked graves.* Global News. https://globalnews.ca/news/9216470/residential-school-ungraved-graves-canada/

Hoselton, J. (2023). Troubling white women's desire for innocence in community-based social work practice: A Foucauldian discourse analysis. *Critical Social Work, 24*(1), 36–55. https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v24i1.8073

Ioakimidis, V., & Trimikliniotis, N. (2020). Making sense of social work's troubled past: Professional identity, collective memory and the quest for

historical justice. *British Journal of Social Work, 50,* 1890–1908. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa040

Jeffrey, D. (2005). What good is anti-racist social work if you can't master it? Exploring paradox in social work education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 8*(4), 409–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320500324011

Johnson, V. M. (2019). "I'm sorry now we were so very severe": 1930s colonizing care relations between white Anglican women staff and Inuvialuit, Inuinnait, and Iñupiat people in an "Eskimo Residential School." *Feminist Studies, 45*(2/3), 335–371.

Johnston, P. (1983). *Native children and the child welfare system.* Lorimer.

Johnstone, M. (2018). Settler feminism, race making, and early social work in Canada. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 33*(3), 331–345. https://doi.org/10.101177/0886109918762518

Kelly, C., & Chapman, C. (2015). Adversarial allies: Care, harm, and resistance in the helping professions. *Journal of Progressive Human Services, 26*(1), 46–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2015.977377

Khan, M., & Absolon, K. (2021). Meeting on a bridge: Opposing whiteness in social work education and practice. *Canadian Social Work Review, 38*(2), 159–178. https://doi.org/10.7202/1086124ar

Kimelman, E.C. (1985). *No quiet place: Final report to the Honourable Muriel Smith, Minister of Community Services/Review Committee on Indian and Métis adoptions and placements.* Review Committee on Indian Métis Adoptions and Placements. https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/no_quiet_place_part_1.pdf

Knittel, S. C., & Forchieri, S. (2020). Navigating implication: An interview with Michael Rothberg. *Journal of Perpetrator Research, 3*(1), 6–19. http://doi.org/10.21039/jpr.3.1.66

Landertinger, L. C. L. (2021). Settler colonialism and the Canadian child welfare system. In C. Shields & D. Herzog (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429505447-11

Lee, E. O. J., & Ferrer, I. (2014). Examining social work as a Canadian settler colonial project: Colonial continuities of circles of reform, civilization, and in/visibiliy. *The Journal of Critical Anti-Oppressive Social Inquiry, 1*(1), 1–20.

Levi, P. (2017). *Drowned and saved.* (Original work published 1986). Simon & Schuster.

Maynard, R. (2019). Black life and death across the U.S.–Canada border: Border violence, Black fugitive belonging, and a Turtle Island view of Black liberation. *Critical Ethnic Studies, 5*(1–2), 124–151. https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.5.1-2.0124

McKenzie, H. A., Varcoe, C., Browne, A. J., & Day, L. (2016). Disrupting the continuities among residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and child welfare: An analysis of colonial and neocolonial discourses. *International Indigenous Policy Journal, 7*(2), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2016.7.2.4

McKittrick, K. (2006). *Demonic grounds: Black women and cartographies of struggle.* University of Minnesota Press.

Mihai, M. (2019). Understanding complicity: Memory, hope and the imagination. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 22*(5), 504–522. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2019.1565692

Morgenshtern, M., Schmid, J., & Yu, N. (2022). Interrogating settler social work with Indigenous persons in Canada. *Journal of Social Work*, *22*(5), 1170–1188. https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173211056823

Orlie, M. A. (1997). *Living ethically. Acting politically.* Cornell University Press.

Pease, B. (2023). Facing the legacy of social work: Coming to terms with complicity in systemic inequality and social injustice. In V. Ioakimidis & A. Wyllie (Eds.), *Social work's histories of complicity and resistance: A tale of two professions* (pp. 219–232). Bristol University Press. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/10.46692/9781447364306

Ranto-Tyrkko, S. (2011). High time for postcolonial analysis in social work. *Nordic Social Work Research*, *1*(1), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2011.562032

Reynolds, V. (2014). Centering ethics in therapeutic supervision: Fostering cultures of critique and structuring safety. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, *1*, 1–13. https://vikkireynoldsdotca.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/2014reynoldscentering-ethics-in-group-supervision.pdf

Rossiter, A. (2001). Innocence lost and suspicion found: Do we educate for or against social work? *Critical Social Work*, *2*(1). https://ojs.uwindsor.ca/index.php/csw/article/view/5628/4598https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109919897576

Rothberg, M. (2019). *The implicated subject: Beyond victims and perpetrators.* Stanford University Press.

Schmid, J., & Morgenshtern, M. (2022). In history's shadow: Child welfare discourses regarding Indigenous communities in the Canadian social work journal. *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, *13*(1), 145–168. https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs131202220662

Shotwell, A. (2016). *Against purity: Living ethically in compromised times.* University of Minnesota Press.

Simpson, L. (2011). *Dancing on our turtle's back: Stories of Nishnaabeg re-creation, resurgence and a new emergence.* AK Press.

Sinclair, R. (2007). Identity lost and found: Lessons from the Sixties Scoop. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, *3*(1), 65–82. https://doi.org/10.7202/1069527ar

Sinclair, R. (2016). The Indigenous child removal system in Canada: An examination of legal decision-making and racial bias. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, *11*(2), 8–18.

Thobani, S. (2007). *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada.* University of Toronto Press.

Tirado Bramen, C. (2017). *American niceness: A cultural history.* Harvard University Press.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future.* Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Tuck, E., & Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. (2013). Curriculum, replacement, and settler futurity. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *29*(1). https://journal.jctonline.org/index.php/jct/article/view/411

Veracini, L. (2010). *Settler colonialism.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Weinberg, M. (2009). Moral distress: A missing but relevant concept for ethics in social work. *The Canadian Social Work Review, 26*(2), 139–151. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41669909

Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and the elimination of the Native. *Journal of Genocide Research, 8*(4), 387–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240

Zeidler, M. (March 30, 2019). *Easing education requirements for B.C. child protection workers.* CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/easing-education-requirements-for-b-c-child-protection-workers-prompts-petition-1.5078032