

Reconciliation: An Intercultural Practice Pathway

Amanda Strachan

MacEwan University

ahcâhk maskwa osihcikêwina (Spirit Bear) Interdisciplinary Dialogues

Instructor: Valerie Ouedraogo

April 28, 2019

## **Introduction**

Chief Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Senator Murray Sinclair said that “Reconciliation turns on one very simple concept: I want to be your friend, and I want you to be mine” (Carriero, 2018). Social workers have a unique role in the history, and in the future of reconciliation, as we have the opportunity to work closely with Indigenous, settler and new Canadian migrants from a multitude of cultural frameworks as they begin to live in this colonial landscape. With Senator Sinclair’s words in mind, I use this paper to explore the role that relationship based intercultural social work practice has in bridging the gaps between settlers, new Canadians and Indigenous peoples. I will share my own experiences of intercultural learning through participation in the 2019 ahcâhk maskwa osihcikêwina (Spirit Bear Dialogues).

## **Intercultural Practice**

As Montgomery (2016) tells us, “it is in the interaction... that the term ‘intercultural’ takes on its full meaning” (pp. 223). Intercultural practice requires the active engagement of both the service provider and the individual or community accessing services. Both parties acknowledge their own unique identities and worldviews and how they function to create meaning and understanding within that professional relationship (Al-Krenawi et al., 2016). This bi-directional model improves upon previous approaches. Both the international development model and the similar concept of cultural literacy were based on a belief in the homogeneity of ‘other’ cultures (Montgomery, 2016). These methods failed to acknowledge that cultural identities are constantly shifting and changing, and vary from person to person.

Another strength of the intercultural model is that it makes critical reflexivity, particularly for the service provider, a necessary component of practice (Montgomery, 2016; Pon, Giwa & Razack, 2016). Interrogating our own beliefs, practices and social location allows

us to come to professional relationships with the self-understanding needed to get to know others. In particular, Pon, Giwa and Razack (2016) emphasize the role of reflexivity in examining our place within racist and colonial systems. Focusing on culture without examining our place within structural systems can obscure the importance of lived experiences of racism and colonialism (Yee & Dumbrill, 2016, pp. 14). While this is a strength of the intercultural model, it also poses a potential limitation. Service providers must be willing to fully engage, including in potentially difficult reflection. Even outside the profession of social work, interculturality is limited by the same willingness for two parties to fully engage. Madariaga-Vignudo (2012) exemplifies this challenge in her study of Indigenous and newcomer relations in Winnipeg's inner city. Intercultural interactions were inhibited by reactions ranging from sympathy to competition (Madariaga-Vignudo, 2012).

Cohen-Émerique (2011) outlines three stages to engaging in intercultural practice. First is 'decentering' in which the practitioner takes actions to reflect on themselves, their feelings, and the ways in which their own ideas and identity might influence how they will approach the relationship. Second is a stage of exploration in which the worker can begin to understand the client's frame of reference by way of respectful inquiry. Finally, the parties find common ground and reach a common understanding (as cited in Montgomery, 2016, pp. 223-224).

### **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) used survivor narratives in addition to historical records to create an open account of the history and legacy of residential schools, establishing principles for reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). From the report, 94 calls to action were created for all Treaty people to engage in

reconciliation. Specifically, the TRC articulates the process of reconciliation as one of “healing relationships that requires public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration” (TRC, 2015, p. 125). Social work professionals have a particular responsibility to engage in these healing relationships; historically workers were sometimes employed as state agents to perpetrate the very harms that the TRC is seeking to address (Pon, Giwa & Razack, pp. 51). We also have a particular opportunity to be a part of these healing relationships, through our ability to both encourage and engage in intercultural practice.

Dialogue speaker Darin Keewatin described the TRC document as the ‘what’ that needs to be done, while challenging us to understand that for the ‘how’, we will need a paradigm shift (personal communication, January 29, 2019). I believe that shift is to honour the role of relationships at all levels. Governments need to take the relationship seriously by taking action to implement TRC recommendations. Currently, only 10 of the 94 calls to action have been completed (CBC News, 2019). At the micro level, we need to recognize that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living side by side is not enough to engage in reconciliation, but that meaningful ongoing interactions are required (Gyepi-Garbrah, Walker, & Garcea, 2014, p.1808-1809).

### **TRC Connections to Interculturality and New Canadians**

The importance of addressing historical and ongoing colonization in the lives of Indigenous people is a central feature of the TRC report (TRC, 2015). Importantly, many newcomer Canadians share a similar history of colonization in their countries of origin. This often means similar legacies of racism, discrimination and barriers which need to be addressed (Gyepi-Garbrah, Walker, & Garcea, 2014). Examples of common barriers can be seen at the micro level today. Residential school survivors are forced to recount their traumas in a heavily

bureaucratic process in order to seek reparations (Out in the Open, 2017). Refugees are forced to weave their story into a convincing narrative for the Immigrant and Refugee Board in order to seek safety in Canada (Montgomery, 2016).

To start to address these issues it is important to turn to the role of decolonization in intercultural practice. An anti-colonial approach to intercultural practice, is described as “decolonizing knowledge production and advancing Aboriginal ways of knowing and being” (Pon, Giwa & Razack, 2016, pp. 53). The intercultural framework also values narrative and subjective meaning making (Montgomery, 2016). This can be understood as a way of deconstructing and decolonizing our knowledge, as Keewatin called upon us to do, and as speaker Bernie Makokis exemplified with his powerful use of story (personal communication, January 29, 2019).

Gyepi-Garbrah, Walker, and Garcea (2014) suggest that the best approach to decolonizing relationships is through promoting Indigeneity broadly, and specifically by decentralizing settler authority over how newcomers are welcomed (p. 1796). Indeed, the final TRC call to action is to replace the oath of citizenship with a new version that requires new Canadians to agree to “observe the laws of Canada including Treaties with Indigenous Peoples” (CBC News, 2019). Encouragingly, this is one of the 21 calls to action that is currently underway (CBC News, 2019).

### **Personal Exercises in Intercultural Learning**

#### **Decentering**

In my experience, social work education can feel like one long process of decentering. Students are challenged to question their worldviews, belief systems and assumptions. After a semester spent questioning how I know what I know, I embarked on a more specific journey of

decentering through the Spirit Bear Dialogues. During the initial launch event, we engaged in an exercise in which individuals of all ages and cultures were invited into share physical space on blankets representing Turtle Island. Facilitators guided participants through a narration of historical events, an experiential learning exercise that simulated colonization. Personally, I was given a baby doll and asked to hold it and introduce it to others, and then later had the baby taken away as a symbol of loss through residential schools.

The exercise challenged me to step into the world of another cultural and social position and to explore my own feelings around it. More than anger or sadness, for me this experience evoked a powerful sense of injustice at the colonial system. I also felt somewhat unsettled and uncomfortable as I confronted my Whiteness and my place in the current colonial framework. Reflecting back on my feelings now, I am reminded of speaker Dr. Margaret Kovach's lesson, that the awkward and difficult times are the most important times to focus on building relationship (personal communication, March 5, 2019).

### **Exploration**

Engaging in the Dialogues' educational forums, learning from Indigenous scholars, I began to explore Indigenous frames of reference. Each scholar shared their own teachings and perspectives, yet what emerged as central is the validity and value of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Keewatin spoke poignantly to the struggle of maintaining Indigenous ways as Indigenous children in Western education systems are consistently taught "don't think that way, don't be that way," yet he suggested there is hope in that the use of Indigenous languages and attention to protocol can help keep practices alive and sacred (personal communication, January 29, 2019).

In the educational forums I attended, participants were challenged by the speakers to question the dominance of settler notions of evidence and truth. Kovach spoke about how a belief in the primacy of the written word marginalizes the narrative and oracy based knowing of many Indigenous cultures (personal communication, March 5, 2019). Hearing this, I was reminded of when Makokis emphasized this very concept in his recounting a teaching from his Grandmother. She taught her young grandson that stars are in fact spirits, just as people are spirits (Makokis, B., personal communication, January 29, 2019). Now as an adult, Makokis has seen Western scientists catch up with this knowledge, realizing that humans and stardust do share common elements (Makokis, B., personal communication, January 29, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

With intercultural practice, the goal is to arrive at common ground, so as Treaty people sharing space this practice offers us all a way to be in relationship. We know that for over a century Canada's policy was one of "cultural genocide" in regards to Indigenous peoples (TRC, 2015, p. 5-6). As a country we need to reconcile not just with this history, but how to ensure it is not ongoing in regards to new Canadians from all cultural backgrounds. Bernie Makokis shared a story at the Spirit Bear Dialogues about a ceremonial pole. Everyone was responsible for helping the Elder carry the pole, because "if it was lighter for him it was lighter for all of us" (Makokis, B., personal communication, January 29, 2019). The narrative reminds us that by working together, in relationships not in isolation, we will make progress in reconciliation.

## References:

- Al-Krenawi, A., Graham, J.R., & Habibov, N. (Eds.). (2016). *Diversity and social work in Canada*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Carreiro, D. (2018, March 19). Beyond 94: Where is Canada at with reconciliation?. *CBC News*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/>
- CBC News. (2019, April 5). Beyond 94: Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. [Webpage] Last accessed April 26 2019. <https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/longform-single/beyond-94?&cta=59>
- Gyepi-Garbrah, J. Walker, R., & Garcea, J. (2014) Indigeneity, immigrant newcomers and interculturalism in Winnipeg, Canada. *Urban Studies*, 51(9), 1795-1811. DOI: 10.1177/0042098013502826
- Madariaga-Vignu, L. (2012). Urban Aboriginals' perceptions of African refugee neighbours: A case study of Winnipeg's inner city. *Canadian Issues* [Aboriginal Immigrant Relations Today], pp 15-18.
- Montgomery, C. (2016). Narratives as tools in intercultural intervention with immigrant and refugee populations. In A. Al-Krenawi, J.R. Graham, & N. Habibov, (Eds.), *Diversity and social work in Canada* (pp. 247-271). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Out in the Open. (2017, September 3). The complicated cost of apologizing for residential schools. *CBC Radio*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/outintheopen/sorry-states-1.4268248/the-complicated-cost-of-apologizing-for-residential-schools-1.4268276>.
- Pon, G., Giwa, S., & Razack, N. (2016). Foundations of anti-racism and anti-oppression in social work practice. In A. Al-Krenawi, J.R. Graham, & N. Habibov, (Eds.), *Diversity and social work in Canada* (pp. 247-271). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.



Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015) *What we have learned: Principles of truth and reconciliation*. Ottawa, ON: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Available from: <http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.800280/publication.html>

Yee, J.Y., & Dumbrill, G.C. (2016). Whiteout: still looking for race in Canadian social work practice. In A. Al-Krenawi, J.R. Graham, & N. Habibov, (Eds.), *Diversity and social work in Canada* (pp. 13-37). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.