



Indigenous People and Communities: The Role of Social Workers as Human Rights Workers

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Abstract

Indigenous people are the members of a group of people whose ancestors have lived in the same land since the time immemorial. While there is no universally recognized definition of indigenous people, but according to the United Nations Indigenous people are inheritors and practitioners of unique culture and the ways of relating to people and environment. They consist of a non-dominant group of people that share a common pre-colonial history with a culture, language, and belief system that is separate and distinct from the dominant social group within the larger society. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples demonstrates the general consensus of the international community of support for the rights of indigenous people. Following points are mentioned in this article such as characteristics of indigenous people and, how social workers can move towards more empowering, rights-based practice that develops individual and community capacity. Social Work curriculums across the nation all devote a significant amount of time and focus to looking at skills for working with Indigenous people and communities in the context of historical, social, economic and cultural considerations, so that the social workers of tomorrow are well acquainted in issues that impact on their Indigenous clients.

Key Words: *Indigenous People, Human Rights, Social Worker, Community Development*

Introduction

Indigenous people are member of a group of people whose ancestors have lived in the same land since dateless. While there is not a universally recognized definition of indigenous people, according to the United Nations, they can be identified by seven characteristics:

- Indigenous people self-identify as indigenous, such as a different tribe.

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- The group can trace their society back to pre-colonial times.
- The group has a strong connection to a defined geographic territory and natural resources, such as traditional hunting and fishing grounds etc.
- The group maintains a culture, language, and belief system that is distinct from that of the dominant society's culture, language, and belief system.
- The group maintains a political, social or economic system that is also distinct from the one maintained by the dominant society.
- The group is a non-dominant group of a society.
- The group desires to maintain its ancestral culture and environment as a distinct people. In other words, it does not wish to be assimilated into the dominant culture.

Indigenous people and communities are very often 'social work clients.' By shifting our focus to human rights, how social workers can move towards more empowering, rights-based practice that develops individual and community capacity.

This will provide an opportunity to discuss some important areas where social workers can intervene and play a role like how we can address family violence and abuse in Indigenous communities . All of these connect with human rights at a number of levels. Social work is a profession that is built on, according to the AASW's Code of Ethics: the pursuit and maintenance of human well-being. Social work aims to maximize the development of human potential and the fulfillment of human needs. The Code of Ethics goes on to state that two of the key values and principles are: human dignity and worth; and social justice. Human dignity and worth mean that social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of every person and respect the human rights expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Social justice encompasses the satisfaction of basic needs; fair access to services and benefits to achieve human potential; and recognition of individual and community rights.

These values and principles in the Code of Ethics already establish the foundations for human rights based social work practice. But what does human rights based social work practice look like in real life? Human rights are often categorized as first, second and third generations.



First generation rights are civil and political rights, like the right to vote, freedom of speech, and freedom from discrimination, fair trial etc; In terms of social work practice, realizing first generation rights means advocacy either on behalf of individuals or disadvantaged groups. Social workers working in advocacy might be involved in the protection of civil and political rights through advocacy groups, refugee action groups or prisoner reform. In relation to social work practice with Indigenous people, the advocacy. Second generation rights are economic, social and cultural rights, like the right to health, housing, social security and education; Working to realize second generation rights is the bread-and-butter work of most social workers. It involves putting services in place to meet rights like the right to education, health care, housing, income and so on. So, every time a social worker takes a client to Centre link to assist them to get income support, or liaises with the Department of Housing to find accommodation, or refers them to a community health center for physical, social or emotional support they are engaging in a form of human rights work. A related point on these second-generation rights is that unless services actually exist, these rights cannot be met. Third generation rights are collective rights, such as the right to development and self-determination; Third generation rights are collective rights which intersect perfectly with the social work practice of community development. Social workers are facilitators for this process of change that occurs from the grass roots in a bottom- up way. The relationship between community development and human rights is so symbiotic and illustrative that:

Community development needs human rights-based framework if it is to be successful, and human rights needs a community development framework if they are to be realized and discern. The marrying together of community development practices and human rights principles is being increasingly recognized at the United Nations level. The United Nations Common Understanding of a Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation sets out necessary elements of policy development and service delivery under human rights-based approach as follows:

1. People are recognized as key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients of commodities and services.



2. Participation is both a means and a goal.
3. Strategies are empowering, not disempowering.
4. Both outcomes and processes should be monitored and evaluated.
5. Analysis should be including all stakeholders.
6. Programmes should be focus on marginalized, disadvantaged, and excluded groups.
7. The development process should be locally owned.
8. Programmes aim to reduce disparity.
9. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches should be used in synergy.
10. Situation analysis is used to identity immediate, underlying, and basic causes of development problems.
11. Measurable goals and targets should be important in programming.
12. Strategic partnerships should be developed and sustained.

Community development has a special role in working with Indigenous communities as many of our communities are struggling with enormous problems and disadvantage. The problems that we face are so complex and often so entrenched that it can be counterproductive to just intervene at an individual level. Social worker is not just dealing with the child or their parents but broader social and community patterns. In this situation, it is likely that the community has a very few viable employment options. Housing is no doubt overcrowded and in poor condition (it is not uncommon for up to 16 people to be living in houses in remote communities); alcohol is probably a problem in the community; with that comes violence, restarting that cycle of destruction all over again. On top of that the social worker also has to contend and grappled with the fact that as part of the 'welfare' they probably don't have a very good reputation in the community and it may be challenging to build a cooperative relationship. The role for social workers is enabling them to access these solutions and strengths, consistent with their human rights. If community development is about building capacity through participation and local solutions, they want and how they think problems should be solved. Interestingly, this might mean that things like consultation and community participation are too time consuming and get forgotten about or intentionally disregarded.

Human rights are universal and indivisible. Obviously, the government has an obligation to act to protect the rights of women and children from violence and abuse but this cannot be at the expense



of the right to non-discriminatory treatment. It will always be the most disadvantaged and powerless that will have their rights violated as they do not have the voice or means to be heard. If there is one thing that we can learn from good community development practices, it is that the process is often just as, if not more, important than the outcomes because it equips the community to then be able to do things for themselves. Without a sense of control over life, people quickly slip into a state of powerlessness. Intervention results in further dispossession or an extreme sense of powerlessness, this will constitute a 're-dramatization' of Indigenous people. This will have a negative effect on a) Mental health including possibly higher rates of depression, stress and anxiety b) Social and emotional wellbeing through increasing anxiety and uncertainty and hence this may precipitate family and community despair and dysfunction, poor or mal-adaptive coping and contribute to substance use and possible violence as well as loss of trust; and c) Physical health as there is a strong relationship with chronic stress and poor health outcomes including diabetes and cardiovascular disease. These unintended consequences will contribute to the problems of community dysfunction rather than create an environment for meaningful change. The eve of the Apology to the Stolen Generations is also a good time to think about the consequences of interventions that breach human rights standards. The experience of the Stolen Generations has taught us that well intentioned interventions with children and families can have long term consequences. Social workers have acknowledged with regret the part we have played in that policy and we are determined that it should not happen again. Long term solutions can only be found by working closely and respectfully with Indigenous communities. It shows a real maturity as a profession as well as compassion and empathy for those that were stolen. Validation and recognition are part of acknowledging our shared humanity. Our shared humanity is really the basis of all human rights.

Social work shift to a more critical focus where students are given the skills to question power and structures at both a macro and micro level. This can be seen in the way reflective practice is taught to students. This makes them more aware of their own position as social workers (and the power that often holds) and challenges them to continually find better, more inclusive ways of working. Ongoing reflection and learning keep us from falling into the traps of the past. It is great to see a



growing number of Indigenous people entering the profession. More Indigenous workers who are accessible to their communities will ultimately improve community perceptions of the profession.

However, I think it is also important to reflect on the particular challenges of being an Indigenous social worker. Social work is a demanding job for anyone and requires personal resources to help people in great need. Indigenous social workers it is especially hard. Because we often work in our own communities, with our own families, it is a 24-hour job where you are always unofficially on call. This can be exhausting and also creates its own challenges when a 'tough call' needs to be made because it can be hard to separate the personal from the professional. Not all Indigenous people who work in community service, health or welfare services have had the chance to gain formal qualifications like Social Work. Because of this and the hierarchies that exist in some work settings, they can feel like their experience and knowledge is not always valued. While these workers may not have a piece of paper stating their qualifications, about social work and human rights in their communities than all of us put together. Social workers need to continue to work in partnership with Indigenous people and communities.

About the violence and abuse in Indigenous communities. Some of these are community development programs; some are client focused casework and counseling services. All of them reinforce the same key messages - namely that there are things that are working often against incredible odds. And those things that are working are either generated directly by the community or the funding agency has taken real steps to engage with the community at every step of the way. Some of the stories are inspirational and there are some lessons also. In some ways, none of this is news for social workers who work in alliance with individuals, families and communities to deal with the consequences of family violence and child abuse every day.

Human rights are not just lofty principles that get talked about at the United Nations. They are our everyday experiences of getting our needs met and an expression of our shared humanity. They give social workers a framework for their advocacy, direct service and community development work, especially when social workers can often be the ones caught in the middle of the political mine field which is policy implementation. Human rights are above politics and ideology so they



are a useful tool in arguing for change. Human rights-based approach to social work is about making clear targets, ensuring targets are met and outcomes are evaluated. We are entitled to expect that public policy will be:

- evidence-based and informed by best practice models;
- consistent with human rights laws and principles;
- designed to meet targets and deliver measurable benefits over time;
- subject to rigorous and transparent monitoring, evaluation and review, and
- Those governments will employ a learning framework so that past mistakes will not be revisited.

Rights do not come without responsibilities. As governments have an obligation to protect rights, they also have a responsibility to ensure these rights can and are met. Social workers have long been involved in advocacy and campaigning for social justice that you continue to ask important questions that provoke accountability. Social workers, with their strengths in reflective practice and learning from practice, are ideally placed to be arguing for better evaluation and evidence led policy to ensure rights and responsibilities are met. Ideally placed to disseminate information about best practice models and approaches – to draw governments’ attention to what is working in Indigenous communities both here and overseas – and to advocate for changes that will deliver the best possible outcomes and opportunities for our children and our communities. Human rights based social work is important in all the work we do, but perhaps even more so for Indigenous people and communities. But Indigenous people also have special rights as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which was only passed by the UN in September last year. The Declaration reaffirms that indigenous individuals are entitled to all human rights recognized in international law without discrimination. But it also acknowledges that without recognizing the collective rights of Indigenous peoples and ensuring protection of our cultures, indigenous people can never truly be free and equal. This is where social work community development can support Indigenous communities in ways which are empowering, based on partnership and recognizing culture to move forward. expertise, commitment to the fundamental principles of social work and hard work on the ground is critical to assist Indigenous people meet to their human rights.



Role of UN & Government

In the international system, states are considered sovereign entities, which mean they generally have the right to manage their internal affairs without outside interference. Indigenous people live within the internationally recognized boundaries of sovereign states. This geopolitical reality makes cooperation by states imperative for the success of any indigenous people's movement. This may require political advocacy not only by the indigenous people but also by the international community. One of the most important advances in the Indigenous People's Movement is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. The Declaration recognizes that indigenous people are entitled to the same rights afforded under the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international human rights law. The Declaration also holds that indigenous people are entitled to be free from discrimination based on their identity and have the right to self-determination. As part of their right to self-determination, they have the right to 'freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.' They also have 'the right of autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs....' It's important to note that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is not legally binding upon states. In other words, it does not have the force of international law. Nevertheless, it is a clear message from the international community, and states that violate its principles may be pressured to comply and adhered to.

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