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## Chapter 7

ACKNOWLEDGING MÉTIS  
ASPIRATIONS

## Preparing Social Workers to Support Métis Families

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## CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter presents four issues in working with Métis families within an historical context of Métis land theft by the Canadian government. These include decolonization, dignity, resistance and identity theft/identity recovery. In the highly contested site of child protection, practice revolves around Métis families fighting for the right to parent their child. I discuss the importance of contextual awareness, critical analysis and self-awareness of professionals in this engagement which is predominantly cross-cultural. I present concepts of "well-being" and "helpful intervention" in terms relevant to the Métis, such as issues of identification, identity, invisibility and culturally astute, ethical, decolonizing service delivery. From my perspective as a social work educator, clinical supervisor and co-developer of response-based practice, I offer practice ideas that acknowledge Métis' aspirations for their children, community and for their life on Turtle Island.

## QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN THIS CHAPTER.

1. How do Métis concerns differ from those of the general public in Canada?
2. Why do we need a Métis-centred framework for child protection/Métis social work?
3. How can social work practice uplift and support the sacred concerns of Métis families?
4. How can social justice ethics, solidarity and dignity be upheld in child protection practice?

In this chapter I consider a practice called "Métis-astute social work practice": this is a practice based on Métis worldview and cultural values. This culturally specific practice needs to be included in Canadian social worker training and education. The Métis live throughout virtually all regions of Canada and are often unidentified by systems and professionals. Due to this invisibility, Métis individuals and families do not always receive the care and attention they deserve in the social service sector.

Because the key element of a Métis worldview is the understanding that all things are connected and that harm is done when action, words or truths are taken out of context, adequate care for Métis people should include centring practices of love, respect, interaction, relationship, community and spirituality. Much of Métis suffering is a result of the disruption to their lives caused by colonial violence and White settlement in Canada. As a result of colonialism, the Métis were cast as "other" and therefore problematic in some way. Acts of Métis resistance to colonialism and racism have been and continue to be misconstrued as signs of pathology when separated from the situation in which they are embedded (Richardson and Wade 2008).

This decontextualization turns acts of protection and dignity into behaviour that does not make sense in a psychiatric or psychological framework, except as dysfunction. Therefore, a critical part of helping and healing is to put action and decisions back into context. Thus, acts of resistance can be seen as indicators of wellness. By working with this culturally contextualized analysis, social workers can begin to challenge colonial social work constructions and help Métis families to recognize the wisdom in their cultural knowledge and social analysis.

Social workers can position themselves as anti-oppressive allies. To a great extent, such a practice requires moving beyond an individualizing, child-centred mandate in order to uphold Métis concerns such as preserving cultural identity and honouring family integrity and Métis values. In fact, even in cases of violence in families, it is possible to conduct restorative, safety-based social work in ways that strengthen family and community alongside contesting the violence and moving towards social justice.

In assessing my own positionality in doing child welfare work with Métis communities, I recognize that I am a social work educator, a counsellor and clinical supervisor working across various settings, and a Métis mother. My main areas of focus in my social work practice have been child protection practice, family advocacy and violence cessation/safety planning. My broader orientation, in relation to the response-based practice (which I am currently co-developing with colleagues), is to be a part of a group providing orchestrated positive social response to people who have been harmed. I seek to work in ways that highlight integrity and relationship: this practice approach resonates with my own cultural and spiritual values and view of life. Since the sacred concerns of Indigenous peoples, such as children,

family, spirituality, land and relationships, have been attacked and undermined by Canadian colonialism, social workers need to work as cross-cultural allies and provide an opportunity to heal some of the damage and violence, thereby promoting Indigenous well-being.

In terms of supporting and preserving Métis families who have already suffered immense disruption due to colonization, we can collectively uphold dignity, create safety, address injustice and uplift the family's aspirations. Since humiliation constitutes a large aspect of the harm and mistreatment a person may experience, particularly in the child welfare encounter, social workers need to work together with other supportive people to redress the humiliation through offering a collective positive response.

We need to expand the child-focused mandate to include a more collectivist, family-oriented vision. We need to ask the question, "How can we (collectively) support parents who are struggling to parent their children?" instead of delivering the highly humiliating message, "You are bad parents." This approach addresses the integrity of family life, as well as addressing poverty, violence and inequalities, and creating opportunities for just living. This is part of the agenda of anti-oppressive practice, which is connected to the issues of Indigenous sovereignty, decolonization and social justice. The social and political agenda for social services should be aimed at reducing the numbers of Métis/Indigenous children that are being removed from their families while offering justice and support, and strengthening family units.

## MÉTIS CONCERNS

It has been reported that most Indigenous families that become involved in the child welfare system do so due to reasons of neglect, associated contextually with poverty and structural issues, which are largely outside of the family's control. Woods and Kirkney (2013) document data from the National Household Survey (Statistics Canada 2011) showing that 4 percent of Aboriginal children are in care compared to only 0.3 percent of non-Aboriginal children. This means that 14,225 of the approximately 30,000 children in care in Canada are Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2011). As child welfare advocate Cindy Blackstock says:

What people need to know is that the factors driving these children into foster care are not abuse-related. ... That doesn't mean that sexual and physical abuse does not happen in our communities. It does, and we need to courageously deal with it. But neglect, fuelled by poverty, poor housing and substance misuse, is the main factor behind the overrepresentation of aboriginal children in care. ... Those are all things that child welfare can do something about. (cited in Woods and Kirkney 2013)

My clinical work and research related to the violence against Indigenous women indicates that interpersonal, spousal and intergenerational colonial violence are at work here in many ways. Understanding the ways in which women (and children) respond to violence includes understanding the familial and community-based intergenerational responses to violence, as well as how people are treated when they disclose violence to professionals. It is clear that "social responses" to disclosure of violence can greatly influence recovery and safety (Richardson and Wade 2012, 2008). Levels of violence against Indigenous women are very high, too high to determine accurately. Various studies show that violence is perpetrated against Indigenous women by both Indigenous men and non-Indigenous men (Monture-Agnes 2001; Razack 2002; Richardson and Wade 2008; Smith 2005). Both colonialism and patriarchy need to be considered when planning strategies of intervention.

*How Do Métis Concerns Differ from Those of the General Public in Canada?*  
The Métis typically experience treatment based on their class, race and skin colour: this constitutes an experience called "colourism." It is an aspect of White privilege in mainstream Canada (see McIntosh 1988; Richardson 2004). Because of colonial silencing and invisibility, Métis people have been treated detrimentally, and differently than their First Nations, Inuit and Euro-Canadian; women are also treated differently than men. Two-spirited, GLBT and persons with disabilities have experiences unique to their positioning. Therefore, Métis people may be positioned in various intersecting sites of oppression and disadvantage. Theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw says:

How the location of women of color, at the interaction of race and gender, makes our experience of domestic violence, rape and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of White women. (1993: 1245)

One way of understanding this reality is to say that a White woman may experience violence in her home or on the street as might an Indigenous woman. However, the ways in which the perpetrator engaged with each woman would be based on his prediction of how society will respond to the violence (e.g., he anticipates the social responses) (Richardson and Wade 2012). If he thinks he might get away with it, he is less likely to exercise caution, to hide potential bruises, to remain quiet about his actions. Similarly, how each woman responds, moment by moment, in each situation also depends upon their prediction of the social responses. After the assault, the White woman is more likely to receive prompt medical care, to be believed and to receive a prompt police response, although these assumptions relate to her class and appearance as well. She is more likely to receive positive social responses than the Indigenous woman, to recover more quickly and to

move ahead in life to achieve personal and professional goals. However, because of racism and structural violence, the Indigenous woman will have less access to culturally appropriate services, is more likely to be judged, stereotyped or blamed (Maiter et al., cited in Strega 2012) and less likely to be supported in her recovery and professional success, and more likely to be blamed personally for causing her own misfortune; she is also less likely to be given credit for "pulling herself up by her boot-straps." The idea that disclosing your problems is cathartic and will make you feel better is a benign world conception that clearly does not apply to many Indigenous mothers who become involved with the child protection system after violence against them has been disclosed.

However, gendered violence is not wholly constituted by colonization: Emma LaRoque's report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) emphasizes that race/racism cannot be disconnected from sex/sexism. LaRoque further identifies how exceptionalism discourses of cultural difference obscure violence against Indigenous women perpetrated by Indigenous men. She wrote: "I have also been concerned about the popularity of offering 'cultural differences' as an explanation for sexual violence" (1994: 76).

For various reasons related to power, race and gender, it can be unsafe for Métis and First Nations women to speak out and report violence (Amnesty International 2004; Moorecroft 2011; Richardson and Wade 2008; Strega 2012). Many Indigenous women reported that their life got worse, not better, after disclosing violence, primarily due to the negative social responses they received from others. While abused Métis mothers cannot easily leave and find new housing, they know they will be judged negatively if they do not take this action. Unfortunately, victim-blaming discourses have become entrenched in the literature of the helping professions (Richardson and Wade 2008), which often provides decontextualized platitudes that sound like running shoe slogans — "Just do it!" Leaving a violent situation may mean that a woman and her children become homeless; it may mean that her children are removed by the state. This injustice must be addressed: social workers can and should play a central part in changing such attitudes.

In 1985, Justice Edwin Kimelman released a highly critical review of Aboriginal child apprehension entitled *No Quiet Place: Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements*. In this report, popularly known as the Kimelman Report, he and his committee, after holding hearings and listening to oral testimony, made 109 recommendations for policy change. Kimelman concluded that "cultural genocide has taken place in a systematic, routine manner." He was particularly appalled at the tendency to have Aboriginal children from Canada adopted out to American families, calling it a policy of "wholesale exportation." Kimelman finished his report by expressing his thoughts on his findings:

An abysmal lack of sensitivity to children and families was revealed. Families approached agencies for help and found that what was described as being in the child's "best interest" resulted in their families being torn asunder and siblings separated. Social workers grappled with cultural patterns far different than their own with no preparation and no opportunity to gain understanding.

The reality of removing children from their homes without adequate perusal of alternatives is sometimes overlooked in individualist-oriented social work practice that is not informed by social justice and efforts to avoid replicating dominance. Such practice is highly damaging to Métis families and to Métis cultural survival.

### KEY INGREDIENTS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH MÉTIS FAMILIES

Métis/Cree child and youth care educator Shanne McCaffrey (2010) maintains that the child protection system should apply the Gladue principle. This principle in child welfare cases, part of the Criminal Code of Canada (1985), states that judges must take into account the unique historical context of Aboriginal persons for criminal sentencing purposes. McCaffrey argues that a Gladue analysis would promote the consideration of historical and contemporary aspects of colonization in child welfare cases. Such an analysis would facilitate an understanding of the systemic barriers for Métis mothers including the state processes which define battered mothers as being "unfit," and then proceed with the removal of their children, when other options are possible. The Gladue principle could also guide social workers in the application of decolonizing strategies, some which are outlined in Richardson (2008: 116).

Ethical, anti-oppressive social work with a response-based lens requires a clear understanding of 1. context, 2. situational conditions, 3. events, 4. responses to events, 5. social responses/the responses of others to the person disclosing violence or to family members, and 6. the person's responses to the social responses (Richardson and Wade 2012). This kind of informational mapping can guide and inform the intervention while getting important information on the real nature of the issue or risk. This approach is unique in that the strengths, such as the person's resistance and responses to events and to others are documented as part of their safety knowledge, capacity and strength. The approach goes beyond the concept of resilience, since it clearly shows the ways that people resist mistreatment through their knowledge, agency, pre-existing ability and values. These qualities and actions, which highlight for clients what strengths they possess, are crucial for understanding people in the context of social work (Richardson 2008; Richardson and Wade 2008).

Métis authors have documented what I call "sacred concerns," the things most valued by Métis people: connection with loved ones, with family, community and with cultural practices, and connection to the land and the environment, and the sense of spirituality that is infused therein (Carrière 2008; McCaffrey 2010, Richardson 2004). Many of these key relationships and practices were disrupted by colonial violence; they can be redressed through anti-oppressive, decolonizing social work. It is important to find examples of socially just practice to inspire and sustain our work. In this section I describe a number of approaches that have helped me in doing anti-oppressive practice.

Allan Wade's focus on human dignity has provided a very helpful "way in" to understanding human activity, resistance to oppression and the need for redress where violations have occurred (Wade 1997, 1995). Vikki Reynold's focus on ethical, social justice-aligned practice has been poignant for me, along with what it means to be an ally across group lines (2008). I have appreciated Linda Coates' focus on the importance of accurate language (1997) and Shelly Bonnah's deep attention to the voice and needs of youth in professional practice (2008). The field of family therapy has shown me the importance of systemic thinking — that the problem is not in the person but in the social world, in the systemic relationships between people. As a result of addressing the struggles facing individuals and families, I have gained deeper awareness of what it means to work with "power and possibility." It is clear that insufficient levels of democracy and choice can result in constraints that limit well-being on many levels.

More recently I have enjoyed Hans Skott-Myhre's view that working with youth can be a revolutionary vehicle against the exploits of capitalism. For example, youth outreach work is often based inside offices in a controlled environment rather than in outside spaces. The outside, what Hardt and Negri (2009) call "the commons," is a political space that allows for alternative conversation and actions. Skot-Myhres (2006) also advocates for social action and community projects as opposed to conducting individual or group therapy, seeing engagement in social justice as the medicine for both personal and societal change.

Scott Kouri's expanded versions of self, which he is exploring in his practice (2014), resonate for me, because I believe we need to move beyond notions of an individualistic self in work with Métis and other Indigenous groups. We also need to consider "immanence" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004), a force that can be found in groups, families and selves: it radiates from wholeness and sits in opposition to the need to break things apart in order to analyze them. Kouri explains that "immanence posits existence as a single self-organizing system without an outside: all things, forces, thoughts, and events are part of this one plane without a separation or ordering principle" (2014: 43).

As a perspective or movement, wholism/holism also considers the unified

one and its connection to "source" and all that is. Baskin (2011: 107) writes that wholism relates to wholeness and holism to "what is holy." I believe the recent hyper-focus on neuropsychology in the social fields takes us away from an appropriate wholism that matters in our social-justice oriented work. I appreciate the words of Raymond Tallis, former physician and clinical scientist turned philosopher/poet:

We are not stand-alone brains. We are part of a community of minds, a human world, that is remote in many respects from what can be observed in brains. Even if that community ultimately originated from brains, this was the work of trillions of brains over hundreds of thousands of years: individual, present-day brains are merely the entrance ticket to the drama of social life, not the drama itself. Trying to understand the community of minds in which we participate by imaging neural tissue is like trying to hear the whispering of woods by applying a stethoscope to an acorn. (*Guardian* 2012)

Similar to holism and integrity, immanence is about resisting bifurcation or hierarchies: this idea resonates with being Métis. For example, research has shown that the Métis identity position is one of wholeness, despite colonial efforts to cast the Métis as "half-breeds" or "mixed" (Richardson 2004): this labelling constitutes a dissection of one's being that is an indignity and painful and unhelpful both in the social world and in therapeutic settings.

This is the kind of "picture" that guides my work. Utilizing the tasks of talking, listening, analyzing, assessing, prescribing and designing interventions misses the point that there is really something bigger at work. When it is going well, the "it" of it can achieve Lacey's concept of the social divine — the sense that collective action just resulted in something aesthetic and even magical for those involved (Richardson and Reynolds: 2012). This idea suggests that things can come together in such a brilliant way that the highest aspirations of the person resonate while the whole is uplifted. Words like "uplift," "radiance" and "celebration" are good words to describe the level of social/human service work that can be achieved when we recognize everything that goes into a person's "action in context," and see their aspirations for wholeness and dignity. Moreover, there is a parallel process in understanding that the integrity of each person is related to the integrity of the environment. Even words like "ecological practice" don't really get to the heart of what is possible in the "social divine" of the therapeutic encounter. These qualities that I attempt to address in a generalist practice are also visible in what I would call a Métis-astute practice.

## MÉTIS-ASTUTE OR MÉTIS-INFORMED PRACTICE

Experiencing a sacred relationship to land and spirit is an integral part of Métis identity (see Carrière 2008, Carrière and Richardson 2009; Menard 2001, Richardson 2004). My practice and research (Richardson 2004), has taught me that Métis people appreciate respect, dignity and the sense of freedom that comes with living who we are in the world, as do all peoples. However, the colonial violence has undermined and threatened this experience of living wholly in the self. Métis people feel strengthened when surrounded by the sense of cultural safety that makes it possible to express who we are in the world, our Métis-ness, without risk (2004). Although they do resist racism and oppression and find tactical ways to reassert their dignity in times of humiliation and attack (Richardson 2006), unhelpful and unwanted child protection interventions have been particularly damaging for both children and parents. The separation and ensuing loss have become a large part of their experience of self. The Métis traditional story that talks about longing — *La Chasse Gallerie* — is described below. This story demonstrates an aspect of the "inner pull" that many Métis experience when they are trying to find their way back home (Carrière 2008; Carrière and Richardson 2009; Richardson 2006). Social workers need to be aware of and respect this sense of longing in their work with Métis.

### Who Are the Métis?

In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People affirmed this view of Métis identity, stating that it needs to be understood as embodying a way of life, culture, language and relationship to the land: blood lines do not adequately account for Métis identity (cited in Bourassa 2011: 7). The Métis National Council (n.d.) describes a Métis as "a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and is accepted by the Métis Nation." The identification of what constitutes a "historical" community has been controversial; these guidelines also draw parameters that exclude and marginalize many people who self-identity as Métis.

Métis invisibility has not been addressed in the creation and delivery of appropriate social services. Indeed, Métis literature (Charbonneau 2014; Barkwell et al. 1989; Kimelman 1985; Canada 2012) has identified that a general "confusion" over who the Métis are has impeded the delivery of appropriate services to our communities. The lack of differentiation of the Métis from other Indigenous people is not only a service provision issue. The colonial juridical system has a significant role in framing Indigenous identity in Canada, and is central to the perceived "confusion" over who the Métis are. Within a colonial context, this obfuscation of a people and their rights has made it easier to ignore the collective rights of the Métis. For example, Kumar et al. (2012: 26) show that, in Métis health research, there are

dangers of subsuming Métis people into the broader category of "Aboriginal" in relation to well-being:

While status First Nations and Inuit have access to First Nations and Inuit Health Branch services and Non-Insured Health Benefits, these services and benefits are not available to Métis. In terms of health outcomes, for instance, while circulatory diseases are the leading cause of death among registered Indian women, cancers represent the predominant cause of mortality among Métis women. Métis also experience stress and marginalization in ways that are unique compared to First Nations individuals.

This finding reinforces McCaffrey's earlier point in relation to the Gladue principle, about the importance of acknowledging the particular context for the Métis as discrete from First Nations and Inuit. In child welfare situations, the lack of attention to the particular cultural status and sacred concerns of the Métis has resulted in inappropriate practice and placements for children. Colonial violence, such as imprisonment in state-run child internment camps, was designed to separate Indigenous peoples from their families, language and culture, essentially the fabric of their lives on Turtle Island. This ongoing disruption and separation of families that occurs in the child welfare system is a central Métis concern: many Métis people continue to experience a deep longing for their lost cultural experience and their missing family members. The following story describes this common Métis experience, and demonstrates a central principal of longing for family and connection that is germane to a Métis way of being in the world.

#### *La Chasse Galerie – A Métis Story*

This story tells of *voyageurs* travelling westward, working for one of the main fur trading companies in Rupertsland. It was Christmas Eve, and they were very far from home. Paddling through the dark night, the men were wishing to be home with their wives and families. A deep sense of longing and mourning was palpable in the canoe as they moved through the night. Suddenly, something irregular began to unfold on that one particular journey. A spirit being appeared to them in the canoe with an invitation that might soothe their heart's longing. The spirit being told the men that they would be able to fly home that night for a brief visit with their loved ones. To make this happen, they had only to follow one stipulation. They were forbidden to look down and glance on a church steeple lest they find themselves back in the canoe with the spell broken. Thus they were granted the wish to return home for one night of togetherness and celebration with their families — providing temporary respite for the deep longing they experienced as Métis separated from their loved ones.

This longing has become a Métis predicament. It has followed Métis children

through Canada's state-driven attempts at assimilation, through the internment camps for Indigenous children euphemistically called "residential schools" (Logan 2001, 2002; Richardson and Wade 2008). It has permeated the reality of Métis children who have been taken into the child welfare system. The longing is a byproduct of the broken hearts of a people continually resisting the scourge of colonialism in Canada. In times of displacement, loneliness can help us find the way home (Carrière and Richardson 2009). Social workers need to facilitate this process by exploring the resistance of Métis families to the kidnapping, removal and internment of their young family members.

#### RESISTANCE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY AS A TACTIC

Métis tactical resistance shows itself in the various ways in which Métis people have worked to preserve their dignity and culture during times of oppression and racism (Richardson 2006). However, many situations do not lend themselves to overt challenges of authority:

Resistance thinking and avoidance strategies do not attack stigma and discrimination directly, but they may be tactically necessary. Open challenge of a dominant ideology is not always possible. (Collins 1990, cited in Riessman 2000: 124)

Resistance is defined broadly to include any act through which a person strives to maintain their dignity, connection, relationships, culture and family against forms of oppression, real or anticipated. In situations where injustice and Eurocentric policies dominate, Métis individuals and families face daily risk, humiliation and obstacles and are deprived of the freedom to just "be" and live according to their values. Consequently they have developed Métis-specific knowledges in attempts to preserve and maximize their individual and collective well-being. Because these resistance knowledges are frequently misread as symptoms of illness, services for the Métis often become unhelpful, even harmful (Canada 2012; McIntosh 1988; Richardson 2008; Richardson and Wade 2008).

Rather than viewing resistance knowledges in this way, social workers need to recognize them as acts of resistance that need to be supported and understood through delivery of appropriate services. Any other response amounts to unethical practice: social workers must strive to provide culturally centred and socially just services.

Métis researcher Charbonneau has identified such principles of ethical practice (2014). Her description of wellness includes a consideration of Métis definitions of holism and highlights the importance of understanding the Métis context in relation to health and wellness. For example, notions of health conceptualized by Métis

communities are described more broadly than medical connotations of health. Through a Métis worldview, understandings of psychological or mental health extend beyond western psychology and psychiatry to include one's relationship to land, animals, spirit and family and community (Canada 2012; Charbonneau 2014). Connection, identity and belonging are central to the embodiment of being well in the world (Carrière and Richardson 2013). In a similar vein, Charbonneau identifies the importance of "living Michif" — experiencing the necessary cultural safety in order for Métis people to live their culture without interference.<sup>1</sup> She concludes that Métis control over both the discursive and material elements of their wellness is crucial for them to achieve optimal health and well-being. When they are subject to health and social services that are culturally inappropriate, and therefore unethical by the standards of "do no harm," good-care or best-practice, Métis service users tend to resist. They may, therefore, be unable to benefit from what is being offered.

According to Charbonneau, there is lack of discussion of Métis needs, issues and preferences in the Canadian child welfare literature and policy documents. The Métis are mostly an afterthought — sometimes included in broader pan-Aboriginal analysis, sometimes not. Services that merely help the Métis adjust to conditions of inequality, poverty and racism in Canada are not helpful. Attention must be paid to the larger context of history and the relationship between well-being, social justice and decolonization: through consideration of these aspects, Métis-specific policy to guide service articulation and delivery could be developed, embracing aspects of community development, social justice and human rights.

### ANTI-OPPRESSIVE MÉTIS-ASTUTE SOCIAL WORK

As outlined in the codes of ethics of many social work associations, social work is supposed to improve the quality of life for its benefactors. Specifically, social workers are trained to respect the inherent dignity and worth of persons and to pursue social justice. Social workers should demonstrate cultural awareness and sensitivity, and promote client self-determination: they should utilize collaborative and Indigenous-centred approaches to therapy and client support, and interact with the people they serve in a manner that is respectful of their dignity (Carrière and Richardson 2009; Charbonneau 2014; Richardson and Wade 2012; Richardson 2008). It is important to understand the collective individual Métis hopes and dreams and their goals in seeking help from social workers. It is important to consider the question, "What is well-being and how is it achieved?"

An important aspect of best practices with Métis people is to understand the traditional conception of Métis health and well-being as holistic. Métis Elder Tom McCallum reflects this principle clearly: "We see each other as being related to

everything" (cited in Dyck 2009: 8). In an attempt to make a more robust definition of these terms, Bartlett led a series of talking circles with Métis women in Manitoba. Bartlett's research establishes that conceptions of health include knowledge related to "1) functioning and sustenance of body; 2) caring for dietary needs of others, especially children; 3) an understanding/acceptance of disadvantage and functional decline with age" (2004: 109). This concept of well-being includes "1) nurturance and balance; 2) a sense of existence as part of a collectivity rather than individuality; 3) balancing of the spiritual emotional, physical and mental/intellectual aspects of an individual" (2004: 19). The second element refers to the importance of being among extended family and community while other points relate to deriving nurturance and sustenance from the land. These findings call for initiatives by social workers and other helping professionals to assist in the reunification of children with families, and to work to restore the integrity of Métis family life. And, although not mentioned here, this clearly has implications for land-use decision making regarding the oil and mining industries (see Smith 2005). Pollution and toxic infusion in the environment do not resonate with the aspirations of the women in this study.

The Métis National Council has noted the importance of Métis-specific practice. The Council also identified the intertwining of these disparities:

Health disparities between Métis people and the non-Aboriginal population exist because of a variety of economic, social, and political inequalities. Socio-economic determinants such as infrastructure, employment, housing, education and the environment need to be addressed if substantial improvements in health status are to be realized. It is important to note that many of these inequities are entrenched in the history of the relationships between the Métis people and various levels of government. (cited in Bourassa 2011: 31)

Métis Elder Tom McCallum summarizes the importance of knowing the Métis context, in the following comment:

It is important to understand our history, to acknowledge the oppression we have suffered, and recognize the significance of our emergence as a people known as Métis. To talk about traditional health knowledge and healing practices, to discuss spirituality, healing and medicines, we need to acknowledge the foundation we are working from as being from ... That's where the Métis come from; they were the new Nation, the new shoots that come up from the ground from Mother Earth. (Métis Centre 2008: 15)

### The Importance of Métis-Astute Social Work Practice

This chapter has explored the importance of considering historical context in the provision of social services to Métis people. Dana Seaborn and I comment further:

Particular challenges, concerns and considerations exist for those engaging in social work in a Métis context. While many of the historical events described earlier relate to the current struggles of many Métis, ongoing identity challenges must be attended to in professional practice. Métis families may experience immediate issues in their lives related to compromised human rights, but issues of dignity, identity, acknowledgment and belonging are at stake. (Richardson and Seaborn 2009: 118)

We have shown that social workers have a responsibility toward Métis families to highlight the importance of context and culture in their work with Métis families:

In order for social workers to engage appropriately with Métis families, an understanding of Métis people and their sacred concerns is crucial. Historical factors influence the current position of Métis cultural marginality in a colonial landscape and relate to the fact that many Métis children become involved with social workers. (2009: 114)

To be an ally to Métis families involves learning about Métis history and the unique place held by the Métis in Canadian society. As well, it is important to learn about the specific forms of oppression used against the Métis by the Canadian government and the ways in which the Métis have sought to resist this mistreatment and preserve their culture and their dignity. Social workers must work in ways that guarantee safety, security and well-being while supporting mothers and fathers in contesting structural oppression. It is imperative to look beyond individualist constructions and consider Métis children in their broader context, to assist in strengthening culture as one form of holistic nurturance among many. While neo-liberalism has taken its axe to many of the country's social services over the past three decades, there are still many changes to be made that require only a shift in awareness and perspective. Leaning towards practices and interventions that uplift, expand possibilities and rebuild severed relationships is an important place to start. We must recognize that most present-day social work is not "Métis-astute," and embrace the study of context in our work with Métis people. And, in the spirit of human acknowledgement, we recognize that this approach can and should be applied to everyone. *Kakionewagemenuk!*

### DEDICATION

This chapter is dedicated to all the families with whom we practise as social workers. Like any profession, we learn and grow due to the generosity of the people we call "clients." Without their patience and graciousness we would not have this opportunity. I am particularly grateful to the Métis families I worked with on southern Vancouver Island throughout the years. You have made me a better person and have helped me to understand the term "dignity" in my bones.

### NOTES

- 1 The phrase "living Michif" is taken from Grace Zoldy's testimony in the Métis Centre's report *In the Words of Our Ancestors: Métis Health and Healing* (2008: 29).

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## Chapter 8

ANTI-OPPRESSIVE APPROACHES  
TO CHILD PROTECTION

Assessment and File Recording

*Michele Fairbairn and Susan Strega*

## CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter critiques current practices in child welfare assessment and proposes anti-oppressive alternatives. We explore the ways in which currently dominant approaches to assessment mask social problems and structural inequalities through individualizing problems while neglecting the social and political context in which those problems arise. We explain how accurate, detailed and useful information can be elicited through conducting assessments *with* children and families rather than *about* them, and consider how ideology and bias influence assessments. Concrete recommendations are provided for how to include important contextual matters, such as poverty and the lack of resources available to support families, in assessment processes. We also briefly address how anti-oppressive principles can be applied when writing case notes and file documentation.

## QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

1. What are some of the shortcomings of currently dominant approaches to assessment and how they are applied?
2. How can anti-oppressive theory be applied throughout all child welfare assessment procedures?
3. How do anti-oppressive assessment approaches contribute to developing collaborative working relationships with child welfare clients?