SOWK 697 Diversity Social Justice Project

Intergenerational Trauma and Attachment: A Connection Between Colonialism and Current Issues in Indigenous Populations in Canada and Australia

http://www.traumaattachment.weebly.com

Website Supplement

SOWK 697

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**Outline**

As a supplement to the *Intergenerational Trauma and Attachment: A Connection Between Colonialism and Current Issues in Indigenous Populations in Canada and Australia* website, this paper will firstly provide an overview of the website. The rationales motivating the creation of the website will be looked at, followed by a discussion on the intended objectives of the website. The theoretical framework upon which the project is based will then be discussed and the connection of this project to social work practice will conclude the paper.

**Project Overview**

The website looks at the combination of intergenerational trauma and attachment as a connection between colonialism and current issues in Indigenous populations in Canada and Australia. The premise of this exploration is that while countries such as Canada and Australia are practically across the globe from one another, the high rates of health and social issues currently experienced by their Indigenous peoples are considerably similar. The website forms a response to this by looking at a decidedly possible theory or explanation as to why diverse Indigenous peoples in varying contexts and geographies may be experiencing parallel current issues.

The website is formatted into sequential sections that an user can explore at their own pace and gradually build towards furthering their own critical thinking on the subject. To begin, a brief introduction and overview of the website are presented under *Welcome* and a page on the *Context: Canada & Australia* will help set the foundation for the discussion. The page, *Current Issues,* will highlight some of the pressing social and health issues that are experienced at high rates in Indigenous populations in Canada and Australia. Next, on the page *Colonialism & Children*, colonial history will be discussed with a specific focus on the forced removal of Indigenous children from their and communities. Discussions on the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop in Canada and the Stolen Generations in Australia will exemplify the reality of colonialism’s objective of segregating children from their families and culture. These pages provide essential context and background for the central subject of the website.

The core of the website comprises the section on intergenerational trauma and attachment as a connection between colonialism and current issues prevalent in Indigenous populations. The page, *A Connection*, touches on the need for a supportable theory or explanation as to why Indigenous peoples disproportionately experience such a multitude of current issues. *Intergenerational Trauma* will discuss what exactly is intergenerational trauma and will explore how this type of trauma might connect the colonial experiences of Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their families with the issues that are experienced by their subsequent generations.

Providing theoretical background and supporting this explanation for the prevalence of issues experienced in Indigenous populations is the page on *Attachment.* This page will discuss the some of the pertinent basics of attachment theory as well as its relevancy alongside intergenerational trauma to connecting colonialism with current issues. The page, *Why Is This Important?,* will underline some of the reasons why inquiry into this subject is so significant. The concluding page, *Critical Questions*, will serve to prompt the user to reflect on their individual exploration of this subject by posing a series of open-ended questions that are intended to encourage the user to think deeply and critically. Finally, the *References* page will include a list of the sources used to create the website.

**Rationale**

For one of my entries in my reflective writing journal for this class, I discussed my frustrations with the general lack of awareness that Canadians seem to have concerning Indigenous issues and colonialism. I had just read a news article released that day describing research showing the high rate of child mortality resultant from residential schools in Canada and I found it astonishing that this was deemed somehow new news. However, reflecting on my own exposure to Indigenous issues both through my formal education and my lived experiences in Canada and Australia, I realized that not everyone has had the opportunities to acquaint themselves with knowledge and awareness surrounding colonialism in these countries. The lack of education and informed awareness is, I feel, a very pressing concern and this compelled me to focus my project on this subject area.

I have often felt immensely frustrated when discussing Indigenous issues for in many of these conversations, I have found myself generally faced with discriminatory stereotyping and outstanding lack of awareness. Practically the only times I have personally had well-informed and respectful discussions regarding any issue relating to Indigenous peoples have been with individuals who have similar education backgrounds to me in sociology and social work. Definitely, awareness of the history and the social conditions of Indigenous peoples needs to be placed more at the forefront. For example, with Indigenous movements such as the Idle No More movement, I have noticed feelings ranging from apathy to condemnation. As such, I feel that in order to garner the general public’s support, there first needs to be greater awareness surrounding the contexts that such movements are taking place in. Essentially then, we need to get back to the basics.

Also, I have always been fairly astonished that, despite living in countries that have official policies endorsing multiculturalism, Canadians and Australians seem to discriminate against Indigenous peoples arguably more openly and even more freely than against other ethnic groups. In contrast to the objectives of multiculturalism policies, I would argue that respect for Indigenous cultures and peoples as well as equal participation by Indigenous peoples in all spheres of society, such as economic and social, are far from being realized realities. While people seem growingly reluctant to make openly racist comments about other ethnic groups, it seems to me that it is somehow deemed acceptable to, for example, call Indigenous people ‘lazy’ or claim that they are always ‘looking for hand-outs’. Even though I always felt very passionately about addressing such stereotypes as well as basic ignorance stemming from lack of awareness, I have never delved too deeply into discussions on Indigenous issues because I did not feel that I had a well-informed and fully-formed response ready.

**Objectives**

In acknowledging that I want to be able to effectively discuss Indigenous issues with others, I wanted to use this project as an opportunity to achieve two main objectives. The first objective is considerably selfish in that I wanted to utilize this chance to further educate myself about Indigenous issues, which is an area that I feel strongly about but never took the steps to really immerse myself in the subject. In the MSW program so far, my main focus has been on my passion regarding refugees and immigrants but I knew that I needed to challenge myself and explore a subject of interest that I had not really touched on yet in the program. Additionally, I felt that I could not effectively encourage others to further their own knowledge and awareness if I did not do the very same for myself.

This first objective is interconnected with the second, in that without the first the other would not be achievable, which is to create an applicable and informational tool that could be used as a way to educate, foster greater awareness, promote critical thinking and, in turn, help to address discrimination against Indigenous peoples. I wanted to create a tool that could be accessed and used by anyone and everyone and so I felt that a public website would be a suitable format to use. There is no specific target audience as I feel that everyone, and not just those in the social work field for example, can benefit from furthering their own knowledge about Indigenous issues. To ensure that the website could be utilized effectively by members of the general public, the language and formatting used is intended for maximum accessibility.

The interrelated forces of education and awareness comprise a significant piece for me as I feel that they have immense roles in addressing racism and discrimination. Personally, coming from an immigrant family whose feelings towards Indigenous peoples and issues weigh more so on the negative side, I can say that a huge contribution to the formation of my own worldview on Indigenous issues comes from my education. And thinking about various campaigns, university classes, and intercultural effectiveness or cultural diversity workshops and training programs which serve to address racism and discrimination, I would argue that their core objectives are to educate and promote awareness. It is intended then that the website follows in this stream of different modes of conveying knowledge and awareness. Also, the section of the website which contains critical questions is meant to encourage deeper and more reflective analysis as to further an user’s engagement with the development of greater understanding and awareness.

**Theoretical Framework**

In understanding why various health and social issues are so disproportionately prevalent amongst Indigenous peoples, a multitude of theoretical explanations can be put forth. However, theories that the prevalence of such issues can be attributed to differing cultural values or genetics for example prove not only unsupported but are also arguably highly oppressive. The theoretical framework I am adhering to for this project, which is also the centerpiece of the project, is that of intergenerational trauma as supplemented by attachment theory. By referencing the literature on intergenerational trauma and attachment, a connection between colonialism, namely the forced removals of Indigenous children, and current health and social issues ranging from child mortality to homelessness can be effectively theorized.

While the website delves into more detail, the essential components of the framework I am using include that trauma can be transmitted through various ways from parent to child, or from generation to generation, just as culture, skills and knowledge can be (Doucet & Rovers, 2007; Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2009, p.7). Applying this to the subject of the project, the impacts of the traumatic experiences an Indigenous child was exposed to during colonialism can be passed on to the future offspring of that child and hence trauma has become intergenerational.

And according to attachment theory, the traumas experienced by a parent and the parent’s resultant behavior can negatively contribute to their child’s development of insecure attachment which shapes how the child continues to develop into adulthood (Ringel, 2005, pp.434, 433). Incorporating this into the discussion then, a parent’s unresolved issues surrounding their experienced traumas as a child in an institution and how this has influenced their parenting behaviours can foster insecurity and lack of confidence in a child’s relationship with the parent. This can in turn create insecurity and lack of confidence in other areas of the child’s life continuing on into adulthood, which can contribute to that child’s later experiences with various health or social issues.

I feel that such a theoretical explanation for the high rates of issues experienced in Indigenous populations is suitable for it highly complements an anti-oppressive and person-centred social work approach. Intergenerational trauma and attachment form a framework for understanding Indigenous issues with a recognition of the multiple oppressions that Indigenous peoples have been exposed to while also remaining cognizant that each individual experience of oppression is different and person-specific.

**Connection to Practice**

While this website is meant to be an accessible tool for the general public, I contend that it also has great relevancy to social work practice as it may be useful in furthering mindfulness, acting as a resource, or supporting acts of advocacy. Coming from the MSW International and Community Development stream, there is heavy emphasis on acknowledging the interconnectedness between the micro- and macro-levels for various issues and the conceptualization of the website takes this into account. The connection between the levels of analysis of the subject can be exemplified by connecting the micro-level of individual experiences of various health and social issues with the macro-level of colonialism and post-colonialism.

By furthering our own understandings of how each concern is comprised of multiple layers, social workers can be more attentive to the underlying issues that a client brings in with them. And in integrating theory with practice, intergenerational trauma and attachment theory can provide a lens through which a social worker can interpret the experience of various issues. For example, in community development work with an Indigenous community, a social worker can appreciate how the effects of colonialism continue to heavily shape the current issues and conditions that are experienced in the community and can then readily incorporate such considerations when performing needs evaluations or engaging in participatory action research.

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