

Implicated Subjects: Social Workers, Settler Colonialism, and the Quest for (Non)Innocence



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

Jill Hoselton, BSW, MSW, PhD Student
Faculty of Social Work

Background

Settler Colonialism

- Settler colonialism is a distinct form of colonization.
- Settler-migrants in new territories engage in a process of “removal” to establish their own “ideal social body” (Veracini, 2010 p. 4; Wolfe, 2006).
- Key to settler colonialism is understanding it as a “structure not an event” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 309).
- Simpson (2011) views settler colonialism through an Indigenous lens as an occupation and subjugation and critically an apocalyptic reality that was faced by Indigenous people in Canada.
- Simpson (2011) illuminates the counter resistance of Indigenous people and communities that occurred in response to settler-occupation and portrays Indigenous people in Canada as survivors of Indigenous and cultural genocide.

Implicated Subject

- Rothberg (2019) introduces the “‘implicated subject’ and the related notion of ‘implication’ [to 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’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 to not just imagine itself as a site of social justice, but to actually be a site of social justice.

Recommendations:

Transformative Justice as Practice of Non-Innocence:

- Transformative justice “moves us towards equity and liberation rather than maintaining the current systems of retribution and punishment. By interrupting cycles of violence and abuse, transformative justice builds upon legacies of resilience and resistance” (Generation Five, 2005, p. 26)



Literature Review: Social Work’s Implication in Settler Colonialism

- Social work played a key role in settler colonialism, most significantly responsible for removing Indigenous children from their homes and communities (Landertinger, 2021; Sinclair, 2016).
- This state-sanctioned violence employed by social workers was and is exercised through three distinct phases, namely the Residential School system, the Sixties Scoop, and child welfare.
- While these three junctures are distinct, they are also evolutionary: post-colonial studies for example makes visible the ways in which the colonial past seeps into the present (Gandhi, 2019).

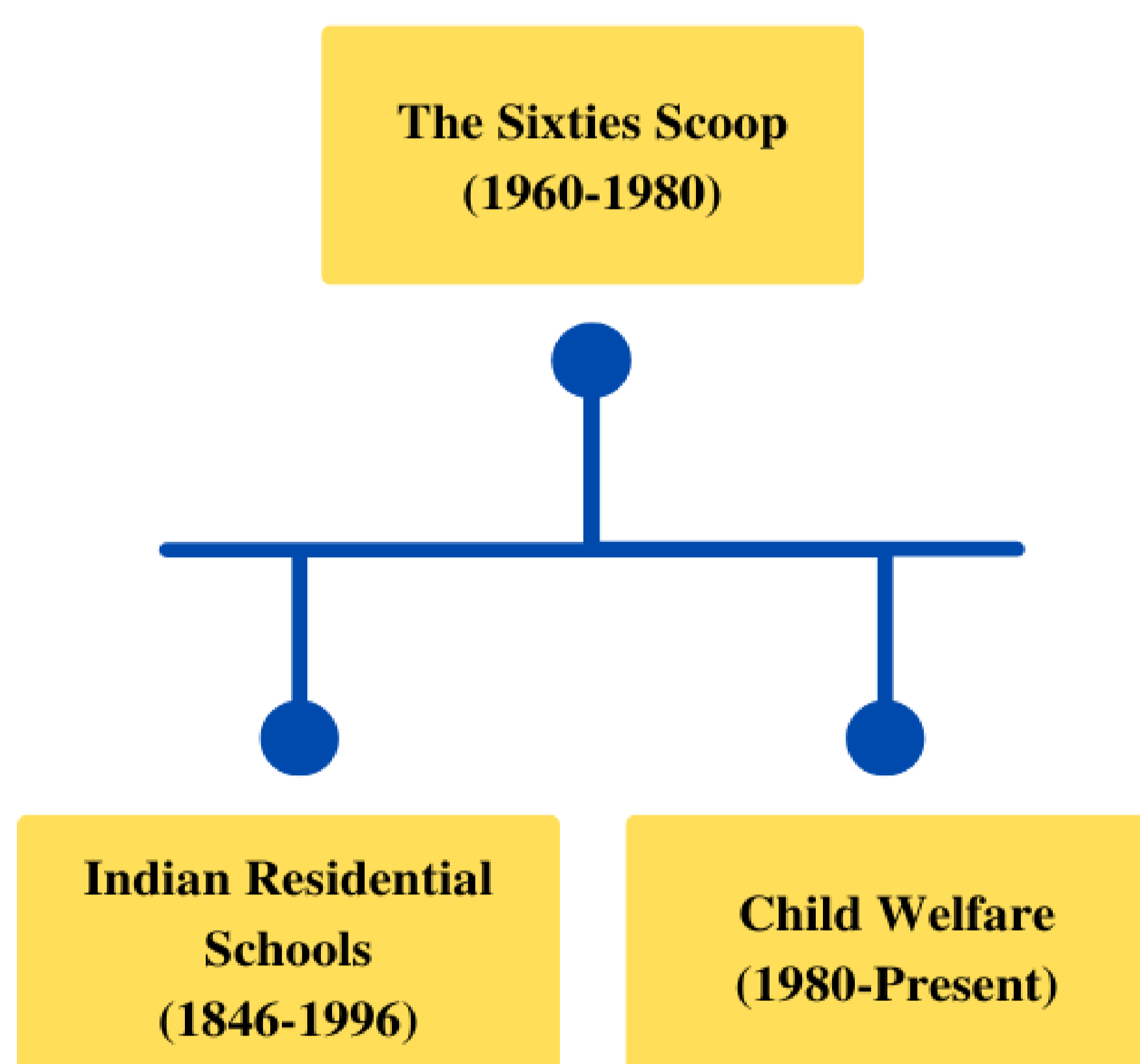


Fig. 1 Three Phases of Child Removal in Canada

Selected References

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Social Work’s Quest for Innocence

- Critical social work researchers have discussed in depth the profession’s ongoing investment in innocence, which in effect, conceals its implication in racial and colonial violence. A more accurate portrayal of social work might illuminate what critical social workers describe the profession to be: a paradoxical role of both helping and harming (Kelly & Chapman, 2015) and most certainly not a project of innocence (Rositer, 2001).
- In referencing social work’s investment in innocence, Cindy Blackstock (2009) states: “The belief that we know what good is, are good, and can instill good in others, are so ingrained in the social work fabric that there is little meaningful conversation about our potential to do harm. Even when confronted by graphic evidence of harm arising from social work actions our historical response has often been to protect ourselves from seeing what we perhaps fear the most – we, the good guys, doing the harm” (p. 28).

Land Acknowledgement

The University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work, Edmonton campus, respectfully acknowledges the traditional territories of the Indigenous people of the Treaty 6 and 7 regions of Northern and Southern Alberta.

