INDIGENOUS YOUTH LEAVING CARE IN CANADA: LESSONS FROM OUR PAST AND PRESENT

Abstract

This chapter will critically examine the notion of Indigenous youth leaving care by arguing that all forms of separation, including adoption, should be analyzed through the lens of ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples.

Several immediate and long-term practices are examined, some of which call for greater support for Indigenous ways of caring for children, urgent measures to address poverty in Indigenous communities, cultural planning for Indigenous children that are currently separated from their families and communities, and ways of supporting Indigenous youth that are looking to re-connect with their families, communities and cultures.

Keywords: Indigenous youth, Transracial Adoption, Canada, Child Welfare, Custom Adoption, Kinship, 60’s scoop, youth leaving care

Introduction

As one way of honoring Indigenous knowledges, the authors will start by introducing ourselves to the readers to demonstrate a commitment to relationality in our work.

Elizabeth: Tansi, my name is Elizabeth Fast and my personal connection to this work comes from my mixed ancestry – Mennonite on my father’s side and Métis on my mother’s side. My
personal explorations into my ancestry, my education, as well as my relationships with Indigenous friends and colleagues have helped me to understand the deep need for connection to our family histories. My frustrations working in the child welfare system advocating for youth leaving care inform the way I have come to understand the many ways that Indigenous youth continue to be separated from their families and communities as an indication of ongoing colonization.

Zeina: Marhaba. My connection to this work is based on a personal de-colonizing process to learn from Indigenous ways of caring for children. Originally from Lebanon, I arrived in Canada as an immigrant/settler in 2015. Since then, I have been learning about the legacy of the colonial forced separation on Indigenous children and the continuous interference in the structure of Indigenous families. Before arriving in Canada, I was extensively engaged in advocating for the rights of children without parental focusing on preventing separation.

Marie-Ève: I am of French-Canadian ancestry, and was born and raised in Kanien'kehá:ka Territory (in Montreal). Working on understanding this identity as a settler, and assuming the responsibilities that come with this position, I am currently working on doctoral research addressing the colonial aspects of the education system, the socio-cultural theories it relies on, and the decolonizing perspectives of indigenous higher education. Thus, I bring to this conversation my reflections on colonization, decolonization, and Indigenous knowledges as decolonizing tools.

Vicky: tânisi, kwe, sago, watchiye, I was born Shelley Lynn Taylor but I was raised as Vicky Lynne Boldo. My connection to this work is fueled by my passion to make a difference in policy, education, attitudes and practices in social work. I was born in British Columbia and raised on Vancouver Island. I am a transracial adoptee from the 60’s Scoop era – although I was placed for adoption at birth I am a strong ally to the survivors of this time. I am of Cree/Coast Salish/Métis heritage. I possess the scrip documents and genealogy from my great and great great parents who signed off as “half-breeds”. Over the past twenty-eight years I have been on an amazing healing journey. Collecting the missing pieces, locating the lost connections to land and relations. I adamantly believe that in order for an individual to understand and know oneself he/she must know and understand where they come from. As a mother of four children and grandmother of four boys, an adoptee, registered energy medicine practitioner, cultural educator and facilitator I
constantly stress the importance of self-determination, identity coherence and universal respect for diversity.

Mulcahy and Trocmé (2010) estimated that in 2007 there were 67,000 children placed in out-of-home care in Canada, a rate of 9.2 per 1000 children. Young people that grew up in out-of-home experience higher rates of arrests and incarceration, have lower levels of formal education, are more likely to experience homelessness, have higher rates of physical and mental health problems, are more likely to have addictions issues, and are more likely to be unemployed (Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade, 1994; Bussey et al., 2000; Hahn, 1994; Iglehart, 1995).

Indigenous youth are a sub-group that is highly overrepresented amongst all youth in care. First Nations children in Canada are approximately twelve times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be placed in out-of-home care at the completion of a child welfare investigation (Sinha et al., 2011). There is good reason to believe that Indigenous youth will experience many of the same obstacles as other youth leaving the care system. These obstacles may be compounded as a result of the intergenerational traumas and colonial policies such as displacement from lands, the imposition of the reserve system and western models of education (Braveheart & Debruyn, 1998; Ford & Courtois, 2009; Frideres & Gadacz, 2008; Lutz, 2008; Milloy, 1996; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004).

Though most of the literature excludes adoption as a form of forced separation, the small amount of research in this area indicates that Indigenous adoptions break down at a rate of 95% by the time the adoptee reaches adolescence (Adams, 2002). Given the history of forced adoptions during the 60s scoop resulting in the removal of 70% of Indigenous children from their homes to be adopted by non-Indigenous families, we argue that Indigenous youth leaving the adoption system should be considered as part of Indigenous youth ageing out of care (Blackstock, Brown, & Bennett, 2007).

**Current State of Knowledge**

**Context of “care” for Indigenous youth. (level 3 heading)** When writing about the unique experience of Indigenous youth who “age out of care”, it is important to frame the concept in the
history of colonization and decolonization of Indigenous Peoples. The mere notion that someone would “age out of care” does not fit into Indigenous ways of considering communities, relationships, and caring. Rooted in Euro-Western ideas of childhood/youth, families, and general society, the actual Canadian children/youth care system was imposed on Indigenous communities, with no recognition for their own definitions of caring as part of the existing kinship relations (di Tomasso & de Finney, 2015a). Since before colonial interruptions, Indigenous’ child welfare systems have relied on whole community infrastructures to support child care and, if someone was unable or unwilling to look after a child, these infrastructures provided alternative plans to share the responsibility (Ormiston, 2010; Ormiston 2002, in Ormiston, 2010; Prégent, 2012). Hence, addressing the issues encountered by Indigenous youth leaving care would require some Indigenous context regarding care, kinship and identity, customary practices of care for children and youth, and the history, legacy and ongoing colonial violence that is associated with children/youth care system for Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Crichlow, 2002).

**Indigenous concept of care/caretaking.** As a foreign system imposed on Indigenous nations, the Canadian system of child welfare introduces many practices that do not fit into Indigenous concepts of childhood, parenthood, and families. For example, when considering custom adoption in Indigenous communities, di Tomasso and de Finney (2015b) mention that adoption is a very Euro-Western one, rooted into the notion of nuclear family, which does not necessarily fit into Indigenous worldviews of kinship and child rearing.

“Indigenous worldviews conceptualize childhood, parenthood, relationship, and community in ways that stand apart from Western notions of rights, attachment, permanency, and the “best interests of the child.” Three of the values that inform the practice of custom adoption are explored below: honouring children; kinship; and fluidity” (di Tomasso & de Finney, 2015b, p. 24).

The authors mention that “honouring the children” implies that children are part of the community as a whole, and not limited to the nuclear family unit as is the case in Western concept of children. In that sense, they are not the “property” of the parents, but rather embedded in a kinship network of relations, responsibilities and reciprocity (di Tomasso & de Finney, 2015b, p. 24). In many Indigenous languages, there is no word or phrase that references the removal of children from their family. However, there are phrases that identify communal living among Indigenous families (Green & Thomas, 2005). In Ojibway language, the phrase *wenidjanissingin* translates to “like one’s own child” (Auger, 2001, p. 181). Hence, custom adoption offers the child in need with an opportunity to be raised by a person who is not the
child’s parent according to the traditions of the Indigenous community of the child (Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA), 2001).

**Indigenous understandings of kinship and communities.**

Much as concepts of care and child rearing are embedded in a kinship framework, Indigenous identity also relies on ideas of kinship (Gar Routte, 2003; Justice, 2008). A study by Fast (2014), confirmed the strong need for the Indigenous youth age ing out of care to connect with their roots and their family relationships. As a defining principle for indigeneity, kinship implies active participation as part of the two-fold being/doing relationship (Gar Routte, 2003, p. 118), and, in the words of Justice, requires an “attentive care [...] to the ongoing processes of balanced rights and responsibilities” (Justice, 2008, p. 148).

When thinking of Indigenous youth placed in/aging out of home care, the question of identity and the associated the rights and responsibilities embedded in the specific kinrelationships, is of foremost importance. If the youth in the care system is aware of their Indigenous ancestry, can they act on this ancestry and establish reciprocity with all their relations, both while in the care system, and once they “age out of it”? Moreover, when considering child welfare for children, does the system allow for continuity and continuance of Indigenous nations and their self-determination, or does it work against Indigenous communities and their sovereignty? As the Union of BC Indian Chiefs put it: “To continue to exist as Peoples and as Nations, the connection between Indigenous Peoples and our children must remain unbroken” (Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2002, p. 5).

1.1 **Settler colonialism and the disruption of Indigenous kinship systems.**

Historically the settler’ systems of child welfare have traditionally undermined Indigenous principles and structures of kinship and ways of caring for children, in favour of Euro-Western values, including patriarchy, capitalism, and individualism (Justice, 2008, p. 158).

It is thus in the context of the “arrival of European settlers and the subsequent imposition of colonial policies [that] disrupted traditional systems of care by imposing state practices that resulted in the removal of tens of thousands of [Indigenous] children from their homes” (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013, p. 3) that we ought to understand the experience of Indigenous youth in relation to the Canadian care system.
The legacy of forced separation in Canada. Level 3

The arrival of settlers, and subsequent extension of colonial policies onto Indigenous territories, interfered with the traditional existing systems of child rearing. Indigenous peoples across Canada have been experiencing continuous social, economic, political and cultural oppression. In fact, colonialism has created a devastating poverty and has established a continued deprivation for Indigenous peoples (Crichlow, 2002). The different forms of oppression that have targeted the ability of Indigenous parents to care for their children include the residential school system and the “60’s scoop”.

1.2 The residential school system. Level 4

The “Indian Residential Schools” (IRS) were developed to eliminate what Duncan Campbell Scott, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, called "the Indian problem" (John Milloy, 1999; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), 1996). They were established in locations remote from Indigenous territories to separate children from their families at a very young age. The stated goal of these schools was to provide formal education to the children and assimilate them into the European culture (Bennett, Blackstock, & De La Ronde, 2005). The assumption was that European civilization and Christian religion were superiors to Indigenous cultures perceived as savage and brutal (Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 2015). Between 1831 and 1996, 139 care institutions were established. They “educated” approximately 150,000 children from successive generations under the auspices of the Church and, later, in coordination with the Canadian Federal government (RCAP, 1996). In 1920, in line with an amendment to the Indian Act, attendance at residential schools was made mandatory for Indigenous children between the ages of seven to fifteen, and defaulting families faced legal consequences including imprisonment (McNeil, 2013).

Studies on the institutional care system in Canada indicate that it totally failed to achieve its primary goal of providing formal education, as only 3% of children lasted to the first grade of junior high school in 1930 (Fournier & Crey, 1997). However, this model went a long way in destroying the social fabric of Indigenous families and communities. In many cases, the process of removing children from their families and cultures permanently alienated the children from their family bond, creating an entire population of adults who did not know their children.

The government began phasing out compulsory residential school education in the 1950s when the public began to understand its devastating impacts on families RCAP, 1996). The
government authorities, at the time, thought that Indigenous children could receive a better education if they were transitioned into the public school system. Residential schools, however, persisted as a sort of boarding schools for children whose families were deemed unsuitable to care for them (McNeil, 2013).

In 2009 the Canadian government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to expose the legacy of the schools. The Commission heard from more than 6,000 survivors of the IRS. The final report, published only in 2015, revealed that children were abused, physically and sexually, and many of them died in the schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 2015). Regrettably, the impacts of IRS went far beyond assimilation of the Indigenous children and disconnecting them from their identities. The physical and sexual abuse many children experienced at these schools, often by multiple perpetrators and many for the entire duration of their childhood, marked their futures (Chansonneuve, 2005; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004).

1.3 Sixties Scoop. The term Sixties Scoop was introduced by Patrick Johnston, author of the 1983 report Native Children and the Child Welfare System. It refers to the mass removal of Indigenous children from their families into the child welfare system, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands. The drastic overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system accelerated in the 1960s. Many of the apprehended children were permanently removed and placed in non-Indigenous homes. Over 11,000 Indigenous children were adopted between 1960 and 1990 (RCAP, 1996).

By the 1970s, 10% of Indigenous children were in care, as compared to 1% of non-Indigenous children (Milloy, 2005). 70 percent of those children were placed into non-Indigenous homes in which their heritage was denied. In some cases, the foster or adoptive parents told their children that they were French or Italian. Many children floated from foster home to foster home or lived in institutionalized care. Physical and sexual abuse were common yet rendered invisible. Many children had difficulties developing attachments to their new parents and were distrustful (York, 1989). Consequently, the adopted children felt alienated and ran away from the adoptive family. Those children turned to street life for support and hence experienced an overwhelming sense of lost identity and isolation greater than that which experienced in the IRS (York, 1989).
Vicky Boldo (Boldo, 2016), an Indigenous adoptee, writes:

“It is interesting to look back now and realize how much these people looked out for me as a child, even when their lives appeared out of control and unhealthy. I did not make the association at the time but many of these people were urban First Nations people”.

In addition to homelessness, some adults, adopted as children, reported physical, sexual and emotional abuses. Others were even treated as domestic servants (Fournier & Crey, 1997). The lack of social services and support for Indigenous families and the affected children were compounded with a general social reluctance to publicly acknowledge such abuse at the time (Blackstock et al., 2007).

The personal testimonies of Indigenous people reveal that the child removal policies continue to have serious negative implications on the Indigenous communities, families, and children (Evans-Campbell, 2008; RCAP, 1996; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004). A study on outcomes of transracial adoption in the late 1970’s revealed that by the age of 15, as high as 50% of the Indigenous adoptions had deteriorated (Bagley, 1993; Sinclair, 2007). Furthermore, this group consistently scored low on self-esteem and extraordinarily high on suicidal ideation (Sinclair, 2007).

_Continuous over-representation in the Child Welfare System, and consequences for the youth._ In 2010, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its concerns at the over-representation of Indigenous Children in the out-of-home care and detention in Canada (United Nations, 2012). Six years later, on January 26, 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the Government of Canada racially discriminates against 163,000 Indigenous Children as a result of the inequitable provision of social services on reserves and the failure to ensure Indigenous Children can access public services without falling victim to inter-jurisdictional questioning (Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, 2016). Thus, the colonial violence of the Canadian state and its child welfare system cannot be deemed “of the past”.

Currently, reports highlight that the Indigenous children constitute almost 5% of the child population in the country, however they account for 30-40% of the children in the child welfare system (Sinha, Trocmé, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2013; Sinha et al., 2011). Estimating the proportion of children in care who fall into a youth category in Canada seems difficult due to
variations in provincial child welfare legislations. However, the outcomes of Indigenous youth, in care/ageing out of care, reveal that 80% of youth do not graduate from high school (Feduniw, 2009). Although there is a gap in studies about the experiences of Indigenous children and youth in care, media stories and reports highlight that Indigenous youth aging out of care experience high rates of suicide, homelessness and substance misuse. Moreover, they experience incarceration, are more likely to have continued involvement with the child welfare, and have low levels of educational attainment (Blackstock et al., 2007).

Implications for youth leaving care level 2

Research on urban youth, transracial adoptees, Métis and mixed race youth point to experiences of exclusion - and find belonging as an important aspect in the integration of healthy cultural identity (Carriere, 2005; Carrière & Richardson, 2009; Froman, 2007; Lawrence, 2004; Nuttgens, 2004; Sinclair, 2009). A qualitative study carried out by Fast (2014) indicates that re-connection with Indigenous identity plays an important role in the healing of youth ageing out of care or adopted. A participant in the study, who was transracially adopted, states:

“Making dream catchers at home like it keeps me like calm and level and clears my head and like it keeps like a meditative state and it’s positive, it’s a positive … I can bring my positive energy into it and just all of my positiveness and it’s like I’m using my … if I’m feeling better or whatever I just take the time and I am more positive. I feel more empowered now and embracing it is a good thing instead of denying it and taking it as a bad thing....It makes me feel like whole … like there always was this gap that was missing and now it feels like that’s what was missing and that’s what I need to fill in” (p. 144).

This participant is referring to the fact that she felt badly about her culture growing up because of all of the teasing from other children at her mostly white high school in a small town“V” also grew up outside of his family in non-Indigenous foster homes. His brother was raised in an Indigenous home and he sometimes got to attend different celebrations with his brother.

And, like, the reason why I had … I got to go to powwows and, like, all these good things is because my brother, he was put in a different foster home. He was put in a Native
foster home in Kahnawake... And, like, whenever he would go to cool events and stuff I’d get invited. As a kid, it was awesome. I loved it (p. 121).

“V” grew up outside of his culture, nevertheless he felt that getting to experience parts of another Indigenous culture provided role models of proud Indigenous people. These testimonies show that interventions should be designed towards empowering Indigenous youth aging out of care to reconnect with their identities and heal from the traumatic impact of the forced separation (Fast, 2014).

Social work professor Raven Sinclair (2007) describes growing up in conditions of suppressed identity and abuse as creating tremendous obstacles to the development of a healthy sense of identity for the transracial adoptee. Nuttgens (2013, p. 14), speaks of seven transracial adoptees narratives “stories of disconnection, passing, diversion, connection, reconnection, surpassing, and identity coherence”

The way forward: decolonization and self-determination. Level 3 Text here

1.4 Addressing poverty (preventing separation). Level 4 In 2010, the Committee on the Rights of the Child called the government of Canada to reduce the high number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system, jails, and in out-of-home care and to make sure all children have access to basic services (such as education, health services and mental health services). The Committee highlighted that Indigenous children should have fair funding and equal access to services. The Committee urged the government to think of ways to provide money to families who need it the most to help and support those living in poverty. State party were requested to take effective measures so as to ensure that Indigenous children in the child welfare system are able to preserve their identity (United Nations, 2012, Concluding Observation 14, paragraph 33). Consequently, the government of Canada has the obligation to report back on improvements made in response to the UN concluding observations.

Addressing the legacy of forced separation requires a holistic strategic plan with immediate and long term interventions to ensure the best interests of Indigenous children. Any reform should consider the broader underlying social issues such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and barriers to equal opportunities in education. In assessing forced separation for child
protection concerns, more attention should be directed towards issues related to poverty rather than immediate safety concerns. Poverty needs to be understood in a context of colonization where Indigenous Peoples were forced to survive on a land-base that represents 0.2% of the Canadian land mass (Manuel, 2016). In the words of late Arthur Manuel, “This 0.2% systemic impoverishment is used as a weapon by Canada to keep us too poor and weak to fight back” (Manuel, 2016, p. 2). Thus, addressing poverty to prevent separation of the Indigenous youth requires a commitment to decolonization that addresses the land issue.

1.5 Indigenous ways of caring for children. Level 4

In Canada, the National Indigenous Survivors of Child Welfare Network formed a national coalition of Indigenous people (First Nation, Métis and Inuit) to offer support and advocacy for those affected by the Indigenous Child Removal Systems in Canada. The network aims to focus on the needs of survivors and to provide cultural teachings, emotional support, a safe place to share their narratives and guidance in finding needed resources (National Indigenous Survivors of Child Welfare Network, 2017).

1.6 Considering the Indigenous ways of caring for children should be at the base of any child welfare reform. The damage caused by colonial institutional care, that wanted to dismantle Indigenous kinship relations supporting them as Peoples, in favour of relations that supported the settler-state. Thus, restoring Indigenous ways of being, caring and living, must be a major pathway towards the wellbeing of Indigenous children, families and communities. Best practices are emerging and legislative models for the delivery of child welfare services to Indigenous communities are proposed as an alternative to a system that is not delivering. Provisions ranging from complete Indigenous autonomy over child welfare services, to mainstreaming legislation that integrates Indigenous input into existing structures are being pioneered in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Ontario (Rae, 2011). Such pioneering practices need to be examined and sustained when proving better outcomes.

1.7 The Yellowhead Tribal Services Open Custom Adoption was a pilot program developed by the Yellowhead Tribal Services (YTSA), which ran between 2000 and 2010, and was based on researching existing adoption models in Canada and the United States. It was the first agency to combine customary First Nation adoption practices with provincial adoption whereby families receive post-adoption services from the federal government. Lessons learned from the YTSA program highlight the importance of connectedness to family, community culture and nationhood.
for Indigenous children when separation is deemed necessary. The program had a Child and Family Services Advisory Committee that worked under the guidance of the Elders to ensure that the adoptive family shared tribal culture and history with the child. From 2000 to 2010, YTSA placed over a hundred children in adoptive homes without any breakdowns (Peacock & Morin, 2010). Open custom adoption offered opportunities for children to develop a sense of connection, family belonging, and community ties. Unfortunately, the program closed down because of lack of funds.

**Conclusion: Identity Coherence and Re-Connection as Guiding Principles**

In her narrative describing her transracial adoption journey, Vicky Boldo highlights reaching identity coherence through re-connecting with the Indigenous traditions, culture, and history as the pillar of her healing journey. Boldo affirms that re-telling one’s own story based on reality and truth allowed for “a strong validation of my own inner beliefs and instincts”. This strongly parallels with Sinclair’s (2007) note that many adoptees found a level of truth and certainty within Indigenous culture that provided a critical source of healing and renewal.

The vicious circle of the continued colonial legacy will be irreversible unless resurgence of Indigenous ways of caring for children are incorporated as integral to the right of the Indigenous peoples to sovereignty and self determination.
References please review this section in APA


Committee on the Rights of the Child please add


Fast (2014) please add


Patrick Johnston, author of the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System* please add


not mentioned in the manuscript Manser, L. (2004). *Speak the truth in a million voices: It's silence that kills; stories for change*. Ottawa: National Youth in Care Network.


Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 1-40. not mentioned in the manuscript


---

1 The authors also recognize, as we do, the broad diversity of Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and worldviews. However, across the diversity, there are some core concepts that seem to be shared amongst various Indigenous Peoples, to which they refer here. please use endnotes