

# Social work's colonial past with Indigenous children and communities in Australia and Canada: A cross-national comparison

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## Abstract

This article offers a cross-national comparison of social work in two countries, Australia and Canada, about the care of Indigenous children within the context of colonization and the evolving profession. The discussion is based on data from two empirical studies that examined professional discourse relating to the removal of Indigenous children from their families and Indigenous peoples more broadly within key historical time frames. The studies involved a content analysis of the flagship journals of the Australian and Canadian professional associations. It is argued that a critical interrogation of professional discourse within these historical and national particularities provides insights that can inform a broader understanding of how practices and constructions of social work are shaped within contemporary practice contexts. The studies revealed that very little attention was paid to problematizing colonial policies and practices, including the state-sanctioned forcible removal of countless Indigenous children from their biological families, while the professions in both countries were complicit in the oppressive treatment of Indigenous peoples that have left a legacy of intergenerational trauma. The findings suggest a way of understanding social work as a discipline beyond the historical specificities of the two countries that has relevance to social work across the globe.

## KEYWORDS

Australia, Canada, children, colonial, Indigenous, social work

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article presents a cross-national comparative analysis of the track records of Australian and Canadian social work surrounding the taking of Indigenous children amid work with Indigenous communities at key points in the two countries' histories. The analysis, embodying what Gardener et al. (2012) referred to as cross-national comparative

research, draws together the findings from two separate but related studies in Australia and then in Canada, the second modelled after the first, that examined professional discourse relating to the removal of Indigenous children in the context of the colonial histories of the profession in both countries. This was undertaken by reviewing the contents of the flagship journals of the two countries' professional associations (*Australian Social Work* and *Canadian Social Work*)

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regarding practices relating to Indigenous children, with particular attention given to the state-sanctioned removal of children from their biological families in the name of welfare. The results of these two studies have separately been reported elsewhere (see Morgenshtern et al., 2022; Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2022; Yu, 2019). These studies, individually, contribute to the truth-telling and accountability of social workers in their respective countries. However, we posit that there is something to be gained from a comparative analysis of the findings from the two studies, considering the commonalities shared by the two countries and what such an analysis may offer for other practice settings with histories of colonization as well as for other practice settings more generally. Separately, the previous studies pointed to the profession's complicity in colonization and coloniality. Discussed together, it becomes evident that social work's implication in harm is not only by virtue of the colonial histories of Australia and Canada but rather appears to be rooted in how social work is constructed as a discipline and profession within political economic contexts. Social work thus needs to interrogate its foundational assumptions as a discipline and confront the ways in which it contemporaneously contributes to and perpetuates injustice, especially against Indigenous communities and 'othered' populations. It is hoped that the cross-national comparison of these two studies will contribute to shaping our understanding and construction of an evolving global profession and facilitate accountability.

This examination of the record of social work in Australia and Canada is set in the context of the two countries' parallel colonial pasts and presents. The two countries share remarkable commonalities. Both are Commonwealth nations with the Monarch of England as Head of State and comparable parliamentary structures of the federal government. Both countries heavily rely on mining and substantial immigration to power their economies. Their intertwined histories of European colonization saw increasing encroachment on the lands and resources of Indigenous peoples, with far-reaching devastating effects on Indigenous populations. In both countries, Indigenous peoples were cast as patently and irretrievably broken (O'Connor, 1993; Robinson & Paten, 2008; Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013).

While the colonization of Australia and Canada wreaked havoc and immeasurable suffering in the lives of Indigenous peoples in both countries, perhaps nothing has left as much of an indelible legacy of trauma in which social workers had a direct hand as the state-sponsored forcible taking of Indigenous children from their families that occurred from the early years of colonization and well into the 20th century (Blackstock, 2009; Gilbert, 2019). In what amounted to cultural genocide (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015), Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in non-Indigenous care—missions and white foster families in Australia (Robinson, 2013; Robinson & Paten, 2008) and, in Canada, day or residential schooling and institutions to begin with, then non-Indigenous adoptive homes in the so-called Sixties Scoop and now predominantly white families in what is called the Millennial scoop (Blackstock, 2009; Methot, 2019). Social workers justified such removals based on what they viewed as significant abuse and neglect.

While this is contested, what is clear is that many of the Indigenous children taken from their families in both countries experienced significant abuse and neglect in care (HREOC, 1997; TRC, 2015). The disconnection from their families and cultures undermined the Indigenous children's sense of belonging and cultural and familial identification (HREOC, 1997; TRC, 2015). As a result of this collective experience, the Indigenous peoples of Australia and Canada suffer from intergenerational trauma (HREOC, 1997; TRC, 2015).

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2004) has acknowledged that non-Aboriginal social workers, acting as agents of the state, were instrumental in the implementation and enforcement of colonial policies geared towards the assimilation of Indigenous Australians that resulted in, among other things, the creation of what is known in Australia as the Stolen Generations. The term 'Stolen Generations' refers to Indigenous Australians who, as children, were forcibly taken from their biological families and placed in missions and white households; many spending a lifetime of servitude, never to see their families again (HREOC, 1997). The Canadian Association of Social Work (CASW, 2019) has acknowledged and apologized for its complicity in supporting the child welfare practice of the mass removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities with no consent. The professional association is committed to take responsibility for the period of child welfare practice commonly referred to as the Sixties Scoop when countless Indigenous children were placed in residential schools, foster care and adoption in middle class Euro-Canadian families (CASW, 2019). The Review Committee on Indian and Metis Adoptions and Placements regarded this as 'cultural genocide' (Kimmel, 1984).

Today, guidelines for working with Indigenous peoples in Australia are explicitly detailed in the Code of Ethics and Practice Standards of the AASW (2013, 2020). Both documents begin with an acknowledgement of the Indigenous peoples of Australia as the original owners of the lands and a declaration of commitment to addressing Indigenous disadvantage. Nested in the first section of the AASW Code of Ethics 2020, outlining what social work is and the purpose of the code is a whole subsection that talks about the importance of working alongside Indigenous Australians and the value of Indigenous knowledge and skills. In discussing culturally responsive and inclusive practice, the AASW Practice Standards 2013 spells out what it means to 'respect, strive to understand and promote the rights of' Indigenous Australians. No such explicit provisions about Indigenous peoples can be found in the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2005a, 2005b) although this omission is currently being addressed by ongoing consultations with First Nations, Metis and Inuit social workers in the shaping of the next national code of ethics. Despite this, work with Indigenous peoples is recognized as an important part of social work practice in both countries (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Choate, 2019; Czyzewski & Tester, 2014; McCauley & Matheson, 2018).

As a profession committed to social justice, it is incumbent upon us to review historical practices and how these inform current social work and to ensure that we do not perpetuate and replicate such

harms. In line with this task, the two studies explored answers to the question: What was said in the flagship journals of the profession in Australia and Canada about the taking of Indigenous children while all these practices were happening? In Australia, the closest research undertaken in the area of interest covered by the Australian study was that of McMahon (2002), who explored ethnicity and race in the first 50 years of publication of *Australian Social Work*. McMahon (2002) found that very little was published about social work practice with Indigenous Australians and that articles on Indigenous Australians tended to accept social policies uncritically. In Canada, the closest research undertaken was that of Schmid and Bois (2021) who evaluated the last decade of the *Canadian Social Work Review*. They noted that in this recent decade, issues relating to Indigenous and racialized groups have hardly been published and, where they appear, have been primarily a result of special calls or invitations to publish. This article brings together the findings of the two studies with the view of drawing insights to inform our understanding of social work as a profession.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

Research across two or more countries is variously referred to as 'cross-national research', 'cross-national comparative research', 'international comparative research', 'international cross-cultural research' and 'international research' (Gardener et al., 2012, p. 253). While there are subtle differences between these terms, they all refer to studies of two or more countries, cultures, societies, institutions, systems or social structures employing identical research tools (Hantrais, 2009, p. 15). Cross-national research involves the comparison and systematic analysis of social, political and economic systems or structures across two or more countries, cultures or societies to develop explanations for their similarities and differences (Andreß et al., 2019; Hantrais & Mangen, 1996; Kohn, 1993, p. 15).

Meeuwisse and Swärd (2007) identified three main ways cross-national comparisons are generally made within social work: comparisons of models of social policy, profession-oriented comparisons and practice-oriented comparisons. Such research has included cross-national comparisons of the professionalization of social work (Van Lanen, 2008; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008), practice preferences in country-specific contexts (Bettman et al., 2013; Weiss, 2006) and systems of social care in different welfare regimes (Anttonen et al., 2003). Baistow (2000) argued that cross-national research could enable social workers to 'learn from others' (p. 9) and 'to identify principles and approaches that can be drawn on in the development of future strategies' (p. 12). Cross-national research in social work can lead to a greater understanding of social work practice and facilitate the questioning of potentially taken-for-granted assumptions (Salway et al., 2011; Schweppe & Hirschler, 2007; Williams & Simpson, 2009). It provides space to engage in critical analyses of practice (Baistow, 2000; Lillard, 2021; Salway et al., 2011).

Several cross-national studies concerning social welfare have been undertaken across colonial societies. These include child welfare

in Australia, Canada and Sweden (Nygren et al., 2009), child protection in Australia and other developed countries (Tilbury & Thoburn, 2008), Indigenous well-being in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States (Cooke et al., 2007) and the over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system in Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Jeffries & Stenning, 2014). Between Australia and Canada, cross-national research on Indigenous populations has considered the effect of colonial and national policies during the 19th and 20th centuries (McGrath & Stevenson, 1996; Nettelbeck, 2016) and Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system (Smandych et al., 1993). Cross-national comparisons between Australia and Canada have the potential to reveal and inform us about shared historical experiences and legacies and their related meanings, differences and mutual influences (McGrath & Stevenson, 1996).

The two separate but closely related studies on which this cross-national comparison is based involved an analysis of the contents of the *Australian Social Work* and *Canadian Social Work* journals. Analysis of journal contents can offer us a sense of what was considered important in the field (Grise-Owens, 2002); what was included or omitted can indicate the importance placed on particular issues. Following McMahon's (2002) approach, content analysis was undertaken to systematically categorize, manage and order selected contents to develop inferences towards a critical discourse analysis. In the way Ryan and Martyn (1996) had argued about *Australian Social Work*, the journals were seen as repositories of the evolving knowledge base, scholarship and philosophy of the profession. They were not the only repositories of professional knowledge, but they were key repositories of particular privileged knowledges. While professional journals can never encompass the entirety of professional knowledge of any given period, journal articles, like all academic publications, represent professional knowledge deemed legitimate and worthy by what Spender (1981) called 'gatekeepers' of knowledge (p. 186). *Canadian Social Work* has been described as a forum for Canadian social workers to share practice knowledge, research and skills, debate on contemporary social work concerns and the sharing of information about social work educational resources (Novik & Schmidt, 2018). In serving as a platform for social work debate around contemporary issues, *Canadian Social Work* intentionally influenced Canadian social work discourse (Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2022). *Australian Social Work*, as described in editorials in the journal itself, was widely seen 'as representing the current state of social work' (Fishburn, 1983) and as 'a catalyst for social work thinking in Australia, a forum for reporting and recording members' experiences, a record of members' perception of the profession and its responsibilities, a major factor for knowledge building in Australian social work' (Stevenson, 1974, pp. 3–4). As archives of received and accepted knowledge, the journals embody veritable archaeological dig sites containing artefacts of the state of the art and the state of mind of the evolving professions.

Undertaking a content analysis of professional association journals and regarding them as archaeological dig sites is nothing new. In 2008, McKenzie and Nash (2008) spoke of the Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work journal as a 'prime site for an archaeological

dig into the knowledge base of New Zealand social work, providing a ... lens with which to track the historical development of the profession and its knowledge base' (p. 5). Yu (2006) published an article detailing a study that examined the contents of the flagship professional journal in the Philippines. Just as archaeological investigations give us a window to the past, examining the contents of professional journals allows us to gain a view of the theory and practice of social work as our predecessors represented it. Each issue and volume represents layers of deposits of codified professional wisdom and culture. They offer snapshots of the profession at various points in time.

Of particular interest in the two studies on which this cross-national comparison is based were discussions about the taking of Indigenous children from their biological families with the view of placing them in the care of white foster families and white-run missions and institutions as part of state-sanctioned measures in the name of child welfare and protection. The first study examined the contents of *Australian Social Work* from the start of publication in the late 1940s until the official end of the forcible taking of Indigenous children in 1970 for discussions related to the said policy and practice. The second study, inspired by the first, reviewed all items in the journal *Canadian Social Work* (first known as *The Social Worker*) from the start of publication in 1931 until 2019 that relate to child welfare practices in an Indigenous context. Attention was cast more broadly towards any discussion related to Indigenous concerns. The journals were searched for contents bearing keywords. An initial search was undertaken by reviewing the tables of contents of the journal issues. In *Australian Social Work*, the search used the following key terms: 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', 'native', 'coloured', 'children', 'young', 'foster care' and 'adoption'. The terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', 'native', 'Indian', 'Inuit', 'Metis', 'colonization', 'residential schools' and 'child welfare' were used in *Canadian Social Work*. After relevant articles were found, they were examined to identify key themes and discourses. The search went beyond the keywords when the inspection of titles and abstracts proved inconclusive. The two studies took as data sets all articles published in the journals regarding Indigenous children, specifically, and Indigenous concerns, more generally. The selected journal articles were examined for emergent themes and discourses, including the familiar and the marginal (Roscoe, 2019; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Particular attention was given to themes and discourses that indicate how social work was positioned.

While they have been reported separately elsewhere, this article puts forward a critical meta-analysis of the findings from the two related studies. The article offers a cross-national comparison of convergent and divergent themes. It is hoped that the cross-national comparison undertaken here can, as Baistow (2000) characterized cross-national studies, 'help us to develop our knowledge and understanding, not only of others, but also of ourselves' (p. 8). In line with the theoretical perspective that informed the two studies, the analysis in this article employed a critical perspective and was undertaken from the purview of critical social work. A key aspect of critical social work underpinning this article is the mandate to understand and interrogate social work history critically, particularly the positions and roles

social work has taken in particular socio-historical contexts and whether it contributed to the empowerment and emancipation of people or the perpetuation of oppression and harm (Chapman & Withers, 2019; van Breda & Sekudu, 2019). Of particular interest are mechanisms of power operating in social work encounters and the subjectivities created through discourses (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Webb, 2019). Applied to the study, the critical perspective enables the critical interrogation of how professional discourses relating to child welfare practices with Indigenous populations have been constructed and draws from this relevance to the current context and practice of child welfare. The findings from the two studies are summarized below.

### 3 | FINDINGS FROM STUDY 1: AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK AND THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

The first study examined the journal's contents within 23 years between 1948 and 1970. The period corresponds to the first two decades of the journal's publication and the last two decades of what was by then a time-honoured practice that shaped the lives of tens of thousands. A total of 331 articles were published in the journal within that period. While 76 out of the 331 articles pertained to children, most of these articles made no specific mention of Indigenous children. Only three (0.9%) were explicitly about Indigenous children. Of the three, only two (0.6%) substantively touched on issues involving removing Indigenous children from their families, and only one touched on caring for Indigenous children outside their biological families.

Foster care and adoption are possibly linked to the taking of Indigenous children; hence, the study examined the contents of the journal in these topic areas. Of 10 articles that dealt with the topic of foster care during that period, only one (Gale, 1968) expressly pertained to Indigenous children, although two others made vague references to 'coloured' (Smith, 1963, p. 27) and 'half-caste' children (Nock, 1963, p. 36). Of 12 articles on adoption, no explicit reference was made to Indigenous children, although two made mention of children of 'non-European racial origin' (O'Collins, 1966, pp. 2–3) and 'mixed racial background' (Vaughan, 1967, p. 23). None of them touched on the question of how such children ended up in need of foster care or adoption services in exploring the challenges of finding suitable adoptive families for 'hard to place' children. Further, there was no effort in either article to detail the circumstances that led to the need for adoptive services.

Of a total of 331 articles published during the period in review, only two articles—those of Gale (1968) and LeSueur (1970)—touched on issues involving the removal of Indigenous children from their families. Of the two, only one (LeSueur, 1970) advanced a critique of the practice and policy in question. While acknowledging the increasing 'Europeanisation' of Indigenous communities as occasioning the need for more foster care services, Gale (1968) did not expressly problematize the state-sponsored taking of Indigenous children and the colonial

conditions within which such actions occurred (p. 8). In advancing a singular critique of the taking of Indigenous children, LeSueur (1970) took issue with the assimilationist policy that was in place. LeSueur (1970) argued that any critique of the practices on the ground, such as those done by 'Missionary societies', could not be divorced from the views and values prevalent within the white Australian state (p. 10). However, of the 331 articles published within the 23 years (1948–1970) covered by the content analysis of the journal, this critique was the only one of its kind.

A broader view of the contents helps put things in perspective. Of the 331 articles, only six (1.8%) touched on Indigenous Australians. The historic 1967 referendum saw the deletion of a section in the Australian constitution decreeing that 'aboriginal natives [sic]' were not to be counted 'in reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth'. It is instructive to note that what should have been an earth-shaking development—a change in the Australian constitution that effectively reshaped the Australian body politic—came and went without mention anywhere in the journal, not in the years leading up to the referendum nor the immediate years that followed. Thus, Indigenous Australian concerns appear to have been largely beyond the scope of the profession's domains of interest. Moreover, the policies and practices in question were, with the exception of one journal article, never problematized in professional dialogue for the full duration they were in place.

It should be noted that this occurred even though there were already dissenting voices in the wider community—feminists and parliamentarians among them (Haebich, 2011)—that were openly critical of those policies and practices. The findings suggest that discourse within the profession, at least as far as the professional journal was concerned, was largely ignorant of these critical views even as the profession itself was deeply enmeshed in the practice.

#### 4 | FINDINGS FROM STUDY 2: CANADIAN SOCIAL WORK AND THE 'SIXTIES SCOOP'

This research was modelled after the Australian study outlined above. This study aimed to unpack what was said about Indigenous child welfare in the CASW's journal *Canadian Social Work* (first known as *The Social Worker*), from its initial publication in 1931 until 2019, with the view of gaining insights into the discourses around Indigenous peoples and Indigenous children that found space in the journal.

Of the 1500 articles published over almost 90 years, the study found that only 30 articles related directly to social work practice with Indigenous persons. While around 10% (152 articles) focused on child welfare issues, only nine dealt directly with Indigenous child welfare. Even among the nine articles, the topic of child welfare as it pertained to Indigenous Canadians was only explored minimally. On the whole, there was an overwhelming silence on child welfare practices about Indigenous children and social work complicity in related matters such as the residential schools' movement and the Sixties Scoop even though the 1980s saw the emergence of critique around the role of

social work in perpetuating colonization. Like the Australian study, the Canadian study found that practices such as the Millennium Scoop had not been problematized as a replication of earlier colonizing practices.

The study found that very little was said in the journal about child protection relating to Indigenous children. Child protection discourse was largely left unexamined. There was also a marked silence regarding social work complicity in the residential schools' movement, the Sixties Scoop and the Millennium Scoop. Thus, social work's role in maintaining and propagating child welfare practices was practically overlooked. Amid the silence about colonial child welfare practices were discourses that endorsed what are now widely regarded as harmful practices, such as the operation of residential and day schools designed to socialize Indigenous children into the white colonial society. The study also found that the needs of Indigenous peoples were generally overlooked and that issues of race and ethnicity were largely obscured in the journal's contents. No contemporaneous wrongdoing against Indigenous children was ever named in the journal. Recognition of the harm of these child welfare practices did not come until many years later.

There was, however, a circumscribed critique. A 1947 CASW brief to the Senate-Commons Committee of Indian Affairs appealed for Indigenous persons to be regarded as full citizens and for the provision of adequate public assistance, education and other social services to them. A 1951 article pointed out that while 'Indians' were the first citizens of Canada, Indigenous persons were 'too frequently isolated from assistance' and Indigenous youth found it difficult to secure jobs because of their 'past records and race'. In a 1949 article exploring child and family social work with the Metis, the Manitoba CASW branch argued that the Metis were entitled to their own way of life and that service 'should be equally available to all citizens', underscoring the need for adequate staffing, 'special training' for staff, adequate safety rules and procedures relating to adoptions and the importance of children being kept in their own families. Apart from these restrained critiques pointing mainly to the inadequate government responses that were in place, for decades, there was mainly silence, if not acquiescence, concerning the colonial agenda, and no active or sustained opposition or resistance.

It was not until the 1980s that explicitly critical articles started to appear. A 1981 article was the first to chronicle the various abuses that Indigenous children and their families were subjected to under Canada's child welfare system. More importantly, this article was the first to frame the harms arising from the removal of Indigenous children in the context of colonization, arguing for self-governance over mandated child welfare services for Indigenous communities. A 1986 article critiqued a bill to amend the Indian and Native Child Act for its shortcomings in addressing issues of self-governance for Indigenous peoples. Shortly after, a 1988 article pointed out how 'non-Indian' workers were twice more likely than their Indigenous counterparts to label Indigenous children as needing care or having behavioural problems. For most of the 20th century, however, the colonial regime and its attendant oppressive practices largely remained unquestioned.



## 5 | DISCUSSION

The studies showed how professional discourse in Australia and Canada, at least those reflected in the professional journals, largely ignored important issues affecting the Indigenous peoples in both countries. A common theme that emerged across the two studies is the deafening silence in the two journals about the forcible taking of Indigenous children from their biological families at the time when such practices, now widely regarded as profoundly at odds with our current conception of social work, were in place. This suggests that the professional communities at that time were very much attuned to the logic of the colonial order. The professions in both countries have since disowned this stance. According to the contemporary social work imaginary, social work is about challenging injustice and the promotion of rights of all members of society, especially the disadvantaged and marginalized. In line with this narrative, there is broad scope to speak of the decolonization of social work. This involves critically interrogating Eurocentric views and understandings embedded in contemporary social work knowledge and practices and applying Indigenous peoples' knowledge to social work (Choate, 2019). Social work practitioners in countries with colonial histories must have a firm grasp of such history to deliver more culturally appropriate services (Alston-O'Connor, 2010; Czyzewski & Tester, 2014). Choate (2019) pointed out how decolonization is centrally relevant in contemporary child protection work, given that Indigenous children are significantly over-represented in the system. The decolonization of social work is, arguably, a key area where work needs to be done. However, a broader challenge lies before the profession if one were to look beyond the story that has been woven about it. The narrative of social work being inextricably bound up with human rights and social justice does not neatly align with the history of the profession.

The findings in the two studies need to be understood in the context of the profession's chequered past across the globe. Social work's histories are marked by acquiescence to, if not complicity with, state violence and repression (Ioakimidis & Trimikliniotis, 2020). In contrast to the almost ritualistic claims over an unwavering commitment to social justice and human rights regardless of race, gender, class and other social lines, social work's track record at key historical junctures in various countries across the globe has repeatedly been called into question. Examples include how social workers were complicit in the ethnic cleansing and racial oppression of First Nations peoples in such countries as Australia and the USA (AASW, 2004; Jacobs, 2009), Canada (Czyzewski & Tester, 2014) and South Africa (Smith, 2014); the active role played by social workers in advancing the social engineering programme of Nazi Germany (Barney & Dalton, 2006; Johnson & Moorhead, 2011; Kunstreich, 2003); the complicity of social workers in administering apartheid in South Africa (Schmid & Sacco, 2012; Smith, 2014; Turton & van Breda, 2019); and the embrace and legitimation of the Marcos regime while it was overseeing gross human rights abuses in the Philippines (Yu, 2006, 2008). Now, these can all be seen as the unfortunate consequences of the challenging socio-political conditions that the emerging proto-professions found themselves

in. However, while the particular contexts may be relevant considerations, they at best serve as an explanation but not as an excuse for the stances adopted. The consistency with which this has occurred across time and geographic space raises an important question about the character of this evolving profession, particularly in terms of how the professions have veritably served as state apparatuses. The circumstances surrounding the professions in the two countries offer insights into this.

An important place to start in gaining a broader understanding of the profession is to see it in its socio-historical context (McMahon, 2003). The formal profession in Australia and Canada evolved in the context of active colonization. In both countries, settler colonialism required the displacement of the Indigenous peoples in favour of European settlers in all facets of social life, including cultures and histories (Jacobs, 2009). For this reason, the original Australian constitution explicitly stipulated that Indigenous Australians were not to be counted 'in reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth'. In Canada, the 1876 Indian Act legitimized homogenizing and assimilative agenda towards Indigenous peoples by giving government power to determine First Nations identity, political structures, governance, cultural practices and education, as well as Indigenous rights and freedoms based on 'good moral character'. The subsequent revisions and amendments to the Indian Act remain discriminatory and contribute to ongoing and long-lasting impacts on Indigenous cultures, economies, politics and communities (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2022).

Social work, having taken shape as a fledgling profession within these political economic orders, would have been significantly bounded by the rules of logic and reason of these colonial realms. That included the constructive exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the colonial societal matrix. The practice of social work and the shape social work took in those political economic matrices would have, to a significant degree, been tempered and moulded by the *realpolitik* of constructing social work as a legitimized profession within the given colonial orders. The extent to which the profession gained legitimacy depended, to a reasonable extent, on the practitioners' collective agility in adapting their practice in ways that would be regarded as valid and effective, definitions of which are heavily subject to politics. The discussion above centres on colonial Australia and Canada and points to colonization as a central concern. However, a more fundamental process is at play here that needs to be unpacked.

While the colonial political economic realities in the two countries provided the socio-historical specificities that brought forth the findings, a more primordial dynamic underpins how social work is necessarily embedded and positioned within political economic orders. Social workers, as an occupational group, can be thought of as a class vested with a common set of interests around laying claim to political space and actively expanding such space within the political economic orders in which the profession is being built (Yu, 2008). This requires the guild to be attuned to the dominant worldviews and values in the societies where they are found. In Australia and Canada, settler colonialism was and is a key driver.

Across the world today, the preponderant influence of capitalism and neoliberal philosophy forms an integral part of the practical imperatives that inform the claim-making efforts of members of the profession. Drives towards professionalization underpinned by the desire to achieve public recognition and social franchise present ongoing issues for social work centred on the contradictions and tensions between professed egalitarian values and practice imperatives (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Unlike the stories social workers tell about the work they do, the paradox that is social work has no resolution. Social work, as a discipline, will forever be bound in its struggle with itself.

## 6 | IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Given the intractable contradictions plaguing the profession, Maylea (2021) called for the end of social work. However, social work is not a monolithic entity that can (and should) simply be dismantled. It is now deeply rooted in many societies, where it exists in a myriad of forms, and incarnations of it are steadily taking shape in new territories across the globe. Some of these hold potential for realizing the aspirations embodied in our claims about social work, which Michael Garrett (2021) called 'dissenting' social work (p. 1). Social work has had histories of social activism and advocacy, most notably by female activists and those who worked for the advancement of the rights of the working class and migrants, relegated to the margins of mainstream historical accounts (McMahon, 2003; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). In relation to Indigenous peoples, such work would require the recognition of policy and society more broadly as arenas for practice and targets for change (Strakosch, 2019). In talking about the histories of the professions in the two countries, there is a risk of thinking about colonial history as history. Colonization in these two countries is not a thing of the past but is an ongoing present for their Indigenous peoples. Thus, there is a need for critical reflexivity and placing importance on positionality on the part of the practitioners not only individually but also collectively as a profession (Cleland, 2015). This involves a continual unmasking of those political regimes that bolster structural inequities, oppressions and barriers; entrench professional privilege; divorce social workers from the realities of service users; reinforce professional expertise as the referent point; and actively blame and disempower service users. In the broader context, this means viewing social work as a political arena, a space for contestation. That includes the construction of professional knowledge as reflected in, among other things, professional journals themselves.

Journals have generally been regarded as a medium for storing the current knowledge base of a profession (Ryan & Martyn, 1996) and as a way of enabling the development of professional knowledge (Nichols-Casebolt et al., 1994). However, such characterizations hide from view the profoundly political and discursive processes by which professional knowledge is vetted and catalogued. Thus, what is given

space in our professional journals and what is omitted must also be subjected to critical interrogation.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

This cross-national comparison of the professions in Australia and Canada was undertaken to contribute to an international understanding of social work. While the professions in both countries were complicit in the policies and practices that caused harm to Indigenous children and families, the flagship professional journals of the premier professional associations were remarkably devoid of critique of the policies and practices that scarred the lives of generations for the full duration that these were in place. At one level, this can be understood as a reflection of the two countries' common histories of settler colonialism. The professions in the two countries at that time served as an apparatus of the colonial states. However, at another level, it points to contradictions in social work seen throughout its history worldwide. We argue that these studies offer insights into how social work is positioned within historical and political contexts and what informs the construction of social work in various societal contexts today. They point to the need for accountability as well as vigilance and critical thinking in the influence of the socio-political order on the work that we do.

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The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in *Australian Social Work* at <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rasw20>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: AASW, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rasw20> - *Canadian Social Work*, <https://www.casw-acts.ca/en/resources/publications/canadian-social-work>.

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