

INDIGENOUS CHILD PROTECTION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA:  
USING WHITENESS THEORY FOR SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

*The so-called 'crisis' in child protection (Barter, 2006) has recently become the crisis in and of Indigenous communities in Australia. This paper had its beginnings before the Northern Territory experiment of 2007 but the concerns then were no less than they are now and require critical attention. A concern for me, as a social work educator, was the role and construction of social work as a major player in the protection of Indigenous children. This paper uses Whiteness theory to critique social work practice and Australian social policy regarding the protection of Indigenous children in Australia, before concluding with identifying some opportunities offered by Whiteness theory to social work practice.*

INTRODUCTION

The so-called 'crisis' in child protection (Barter, 2006) has recently become the crisis in and of Indigenous communities in Australia. This paper had its beginnings before the Northern Territory experiment of 2007 but the concerns then were no less than they are now and require critical attention. A concern for me, as a social work educator, was the role and construction of social work as a major player in the protection of Indigenous children. This paper uses Whiteness theory to critique social work practice and Australian social policy regarding the protection of Indigenous children in Australia, before concluding with identifying some opportunities offered by Whiteness theory to social work practice.

WHITENESS THEORY OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY

Whiteness theory is a very recent but little used addition to social work theory and practice. Whiteness has been my theoretical companion now for several

years, having found it useful to help me understand what was happening in the interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers in a large welfare bureaucracy. Hall's (1992) notion of the pervasive yet invisibilised privileges of Whiteness as being everywhere and nowhere demonstrates the vigilance which is needed to address the race privilege of Whiteness. Frankenberg (1993) identified behaviours which serve to reinforce race privilege, such as colour blindness, or claiming universal humanity but ignoring the realities of race for non-white people; and race evasion, in which power differentials are claimed to be separate from race. Whiteness theory is increasingly used to differentiate ethnicity as White from the practices of power which emerge from the unacknowledged privilege of Whiteness (Leonardo, 2002), the latter being the predominant focus for most Whiteness theory. Additionally, Leonardo usefully extends Roediger's formulation of Whiteness as '*nothing but* oppressive and false' to deduce that 'material and discursive violence accompanies it' (Leonardo, 2002: 32) (*italics in original*). Following these theorists, I take Whiteness theory to be position, critique and a resistance to continued discriminatory practices. It is a description of how privilege is raced and invisible; a method of unsettling this privilege; and it offers guidance for more inclusive and respectful human relationships.

These formulations in Whiteness theory present consequent dilemmas. As Quinn (2003: 79) reminds us, not all Black people are disadvantaged nor all White people privileged in an absolute sense. This is emphasised by the Critical Whiteness theorists who insist that there must be 'a nuanced, dialectical and layered account of "whiteness"' (Giroux, 1997b: 383) in Whiteness theorising. Such a position focuses on action for change rather than merely theorising, and thus Giroux finds himself, as an educator, in company with those social work educators who seek to apply a critical theory perspective to social work where understanding is accompanied by change strategies. Giroux offers a pedagogy of Whiteness in which he suggests strategies for engaging White students through critically exploring their histories which have shaped race privilege, moving beyond guilt and resentment to contribute to a progressive politics of social reform (Giroux, 1997a). These classroom strategies are intended to become actions outside the classroom in what he calls 'performative practice' as attempts 'to expand rather than restrict the possibilities of a multicultural and multiracial democracy.' (Giroux, 1997b: 385).

A definition of Whiteness theory therefore provides an identification of unmarked race privilege; uncouples ethnicity from some of its materially and discursively violent practices; and embraces the potential offered by these understandings to a practice of change. I now present a discussion of the related

discourses of social work, social policy and child protection in Australia to enable an application of Whiteness theory. To set the scene I offer a child protection story from a long-term child protection worker in an Indigenous community.

#### A CHILD PROTECTION STORY

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The young Indigenous woman was 15 when she was sexually assaulted. Her family was separated and she moved between them and the wider community, staying intermittently with them and others. At the time of her baby's birth she was staying with her father who was reported as being often drunk and violent. Social workers, a powerful Indigenous agency, the courts and nurses, all from different jurisdictions, expressed concern about the young woman's ability to care for her baby, especially if she was going to continue to live with her father, which was her preference. They all wanted the baby to be taken away and placed in varying settings, depending on their own jurisdictions. There were two non-Indigenous child protection workers however, who were impressed by the young woman and the way she talked about how she was going to manage caring for her baby. They thought she could care for her child with a few supports.

It is now two years since the birth and the baby is healthy and thriving. The young mother has survived a court case to remove her child; an invasive birth in a hospital where most of the staff do not speak her language; constant instances of surveillance by social workers, nurses and police to check on her management of the baby; her father being charged with kicking her and receiving a good behaviour bond; and the imminent release of her assaulter who has been contacting a variety of officials about the young woman and her baby raising concerns about his ongoing involvement in her baby's life. This small life and her mother are not to be free from surveillance and possible continuing intrusion in their lives. The fact that the mother is able to maintain optimism is due to the supports that have been built around her. This may not last, and it may be that in the end the child is removed. For the first two years of life, however, the baby and mother have enjoyed a close and rewarding relationship, and the mother has learnt how to 'grow up' a child safely and healthily.

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This is not the story of many children – some of whom die; others become sickly such that their growth will always be retarded; others are removed and subsequently die, become sickly or so disadvantaged through continual care changes that they themselves become unable to parent effectively or manage any part of their lives positively. Some removed children thrive and are able to maintain strong and productive connections with their families, although these children are in the minority. The social and political environment in which these stories unfold is the colonial past and present of Australia which itself gives rise to the practices of power in which sit the discourses of social work and child protection.

#### THE COLONIALITY OF SOCIAL WORK ...

It is widely recognised that social work's genesis can be found in the same conditions which led to the colonisation of Australia, the development of capitalism, the Industrial Revolution, and the White desire of Europe to shape the globe in its own image. Born to mitigate the effects of rapid social change and to shape individual behaviour, social work is traditionally considered to sit in that uneasy space between being an agent of the state and a societal change agent (Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 1997). This construct was transported to Australia during the colonising process where it now occupies a well-established role in intervening in major social problems. One of these problems is 'child abuse' and how to keep children safe from harm.

#### ... AND CHILD PROTECTION

Child protection is predominantly a discourse of the state in most Western countries. Policy reflects the beliefs of those who are in a position to make those beliefs count. In the workings of the welfare state, which is where child protection actions are taken, Australia's system owes much to the United Kingdom and the United States whose residual welfare regimes provide welfare sparingly, emphasising individual choice, effort and self-responsibility. As such, the practice of social welfare in Australia uses the adversarial, investigatory approach to child protection, unlike the European model of family support which is inquisitorial (Hetherington, 1998) and seeks to provide services and support to families. The welfare, health and justice systems in Australia are founded on theoretical perspectives which describe the role of the state, family, community and professionals in very different ways from the 'holistic, preventive and rehabilitative strengths-based' model of their European counterparts (Waldegrave, 2006).

The principles underpinning current social policy for child protection emphasise the centrality of the family and the primacy of professional and scientific expertise, resulting in policy and practice which focuses attention on the individual, or at the most, the immediate family. The problem to be addressed is isolated, and professional service or treatment is provided to change behaviour in one or more of the protagonists within the confines of the family unit. Policy-makers expect professionals to construct a family unit which is capable of providing the necessary protections for the child, or to remove that child to another setting of presumably greater safety. In this very brief description, it is clear that the intricacies or complexities and varied forms of family life and human behaviour that exist within a range of socio-economic and cultural circumstances are relegated in importance. Policy-makers operate on the assumption that practitioners can know what is abuse (thus invoking definitional privilege) and can make appropriate judgments, supposedly objectively and using the weight of at least a century of accumulated wisdom. That practitioners themselves disagree as to the best and most effective ways to deal with the range of social and cultural circumstances they encounter suggests that the situation is much less predictable and clear than policy-makers and the public hope.

Choices as to the strategies and interventions used to prevent harm, to heal and restore family relationships of those affected by abuse, are defined by the body of knowledge developed over this time. How change occurs, and by extension the learning that accompanies it, is expected to be progressive, through a combination of affective, cognitive and behavioural factors, which derive from a psychological explanation of the human being. One or more of these dimensions for change may be targeted at any one point in time. For example, strategies to teach adequate parenting skills use behavioural techniques, or those to change beliefs about appropriate relations with children integrate cognition and behaviour using behavioural cognitive therapy.

One of the advancements to these practices has been the inclusion of what is variously known as ethnic-sensitive or anti-discriminatory (and its many synonyms such as anti-oppressive or anti-racist) approaches. These emerged in response to a growing awareness of the inequities and deep inequalities experienced by minority group peoples, and were associated with the anti-discriminatory legislation in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia in the 1960s and 70s. Hailed as radical and society-changing, what was insufficiently acknowledged in the professional arena at the time, and is little more now, was these approaches' allegiances to the same underpinning perspectives as those they were resisting. Whether or not the approaches sought what was

called individual or societal change, and whether cultural, racial or ethnic identity needed to be a main or rather a subsidiary factor in the models chosen for change, the underlying epistemology remained largely unchallenged. Not until the emergence of the work of the Critical Race theorists, pointing out that equal opportunity policy and practice was aligned with majority culture, was serious work undertaken to try to dismantle the epistemological webs of the psychological/anthropological influence on social theory. Welfare theory has still to experience a sustained uncoupling from the Western epistemic foundations of social work theory and practice, even though some recent works are starting to act on this realisation (Nash and Munford, 2001; Young, 2005b, Briskman, 2007). However child protection and its practices remain on the fringes of these debates. Perhaps the reasons for this can be understood as the tendency towards risk aversion (Barter, 2006), but it is also possible that we can understand them as directly related to the Western heritage which constructs its discourses of the Other. This might be shown through an examination of how child abuse is being constructed as a problem in Indigenous communities.

### *Indigenous 'Child Abuse'*

There are innumerable reports and inquiries which highlight and denounce what is considered to be a crisis of 'child abuse' in Australian Indigenous communities, especially focusing on sexual abuse, the most recent being Wild *et al.* (2007). The discourse variously suggests that Indigenous communities are unable to prevent child harm; that some of the perceived harm is ignored, normalised or explained as traditional and cultural; that some people within communities are so powerful as to enable them to continue their abusive practices with the collusion of their families and supporters; or that these people are too afraid to challenge their leaders – whether afraid of their leaders and the rest of the community, or of the real fear of custody deaths through having their menfolk imprisoned (Coorey, 2001). A counter-discourse suggests that 'child abuse' in Indigenous communities is a result of colonising practices and structural failures, and that the answer is to provide reparation and resources for the communities to overcome their disadvantages through better access to education, employment, housing and public health services (Tomison, 1997). Such arguments are in turn countered by claims that these resources have been provided over a period of thirty years, and the 'fact' of child harm is now greater than it ever has been before. This, then, implies not a systemic failure but a failure of Indigenous communities themselves to adequately confront the problem and to manage appropriately the resources provided to them.

The focus of the Northern Territory intervention has been on preventing child sexual abuse and it is here that political and public outrage has been most vocal. However reprehensible any sexual abuse against children is, sexual abuse against children is only a small part of child harm in Indigenous communities where 'the present level of socio-economic disadvantage ... can be seen as ... child abuse in itself' (Stanley *et al.*, 2003). Inadequate material resources, such as clean water, shelter and access to sufficient health services and healthy food, contribute to this disadvantage. While sexual abuse is rightly considered to be a policy issue in its own right, and therefore to be dissociated from other forms of abuse in its treatment (James, 2000), there is a case to be made for connecting the high incidence of neglect in Indigenous child abuse cases with socio-economic disadvantage. This argument suggests that the disproportionate incidence of neglect cases in Indigenous child protection could be reduced by greater attention to the structural conditions of poverty, poor housing, sanitation and health (Tomison, 1997). Yet, child sexual abuse continues to be uppermost in the concerns of people who are external to the world of these children, and they have a greater influence in how those conditions are formulated as problems. The incidence of 'child abuse' is undeniably unacceptable, but its reasons and how best to respond remain elusive. Because of the current 'moral panic', what might otherwise have been a more measured response has entered a very public arena, one played out on the largest of Australian policy stages – federal social policy.

#### AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL POLICY AND INDIGENOUS CHILD PROTECTION

The complexities of the Australian federal system affect the determination and implementation of social policy for the protection of Indigenous children. Constitutionally, child protection is considered to be a state matter as it does not appear as a distinct Commonwealth responsibility in Section 51 of the Constitution. The 1967 referendum deleted the phrase 'other than the aboriginal race in any state' S51(xxvi) (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995) thus giving the Commonwealth the power to make laws for Indigenous people. Another constitutional matter relates to the Intervention in the Northern Territory in 2007. As the Territories (Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory) do not have state-hood they are subject to the Commonwealth government, even though they have their own parliaments and a measure of autonomy.

#### *Indigenous Social Policy*

The history of Indigenous policy is complex. The 1967 referendum effectively granted permission to the federal government to make policy for Indigenous

people, whereas previously states had that role, and it was the policy of the Labor government of 1972 to support communities to return to their homelands and establish settlements. Federal money has been used extensively, often unmatched by states, to provide for this establishment and attend to Indigenous issues in those in-between areas of state/Commonwealth responsibility such as education, housing and health. State and municipal governments have been willing to defer their financial responsibilities for provision of such services as power, water and rubbish removal, and rely on federal funding. This has left especially remote communities under-resourced, where legitimately they could have expected these resources as a right of citizenship. Indigenous people who live in remote areas of Australia therefore experience high levels of disadvantage (Altman, 2000) which is also associated with high levels of unemployment and corresponding high levels of income support beneficiaries.

One of the more significant policy directions for Indigenous people over the past decade has been the move towards ‘mainstreaming’ (Briskman, 2007). This is the incorporation of what had previously been separate service provision for Indigenous people into universal services which apply equally to all people. Reasons given for mainstreaming are many, amongst which are the continued poor health, employment and educational outcomes for Indigenous people (Hughes, 2005). In recent years the income support expenditure provided particularly to remote Indigenous communities has been labelled ‘welfare dependency’ (Pearson, 2000). Measures to overcome this have included Community Participation and Shared Responsibility agreements, in which income support is tied to school attendance and modified alcohol use to encourage family responsibility.

At the same time as using these measures, policy-makers have also been questioning of the viability of remote Indigenous communities, with the implication that services may no longer be available for their support (Heywood, 2005). These present services far from meet the basic requirements rightly expected by other Australian citizens, and which, if provided, may have alleviated some of the poor conditions endangering children’s health and wellbeing. Referring to Outstations as “cultural museums” (Heywood, 2005), and “hell-holes” (*The Age*, 2006), ministers responsible for Indigenous Affairs in 2005 and 2006 respectively sparked debates about the public funding Indigenous people’s choice to live on their homelands. Why shouldn’t they? Dodson asks: ‘If it’s an impost upon the public-sector dollar, then so it should be. We support all sorts of public purposes through the public dollar’ (Karvelas, 2006). Dodson could not then have imagined that his injunction would have been so readily but differently applied a year later, with tax dollars funding this unprec-



edented government intervention in Indigenous communities. Again, Dodson is not silent, believing that the then federal government was using child sexual abuse as a 'pretext' (Rintoul, 2007) and that this is a sequel to the persistent campaign of portraying Aboriginal people as sexual deviants.

Concerns are not only expressed about the so-called 'child abuse' crisis in remote Indigenous communities; towns in regional and rural Australia, as well as identifiable communities surrounding larger urban settings, are policy targets. Child protection statistics (AIHW, 2007) show that Indigenous children are being removed from their families at a far higher rate than their non-Indigenous counterparts. These figures suggest that professional and legal judgments support the contention that Indigenous carers are failing to keep children safe, and by extension are providing inadequate care. This adds further support for federal intervention.

### *The Media and Public Interest*

Much of this discussion takes place through the print and electronic media, citing public interest. The definition of 'public interest' can be problematic, and whether media are leaders or followers in constructing public interest is a debated point (Franklin, 1999). It is sometimes difficult to separate commercial decisions from reflections of moral outrage. It is easy to represent and stir moral outrage when children die or suffer at the hands of their carers. Media campaigning for action in matters of 'child abuse' has a lengthy history (Cricher, 2002, Goddard and Saunders, 2001), and some campaigns have resulted in law and procedural change. An example occurred in Western Australia in 2007 when a sustained media investigation into child deaths and violence in Aboriginal families and communities led to changes in state procedures for managing child abuse. At the same time, however, while Indigenous leaders in one remote town sought help for serious concerns, the publicising of the issues (Pennells, 2006) indiscriminately caught whole towns and all their Indigenous inhabitants in the media gaze.

Throughout this very public scrutiny Indigenous people have been fixed in the spotlight, which at one and the same time 'invisibilises and illuminates' (Young, 2003a). These public condemnations catch all Indigenous people by association whether intended or not. This is especially so for those closest to the reported issues. An example is a metropolitan community, different from that referred to above, in which a teenage girl died, precipitating the Gordon Inquiry in 2001 which investigated violence against women and children in Indigenous communities (Gordon *et al.*, 2002). This community was subsequently closed

and residents moved on from their homes. For people whose material resources are already meagre, this appears to be additional punishment for their relational ties. The remote township referred to above is now associated with depravity, abuse, degradation, shame and by extension a total inability to manage even the most basic of day to day living tasks as a result of the portrayals in the media. A recent fundraising advertisement, while no doubt developed with the best of intentions, reinforces this portrait of incompetence and failure. The advertisement suggests that there aren't any strengths within this community and that all people here are in need of external expert help.

Recent media coverage has highlighted the incidence of domestic violence, child abuse and sexual abuse of women and children in the [...] community.

Together, we can make a difference!

The [...] Health Service, in partnership with the [...] University in [...] has established a three to four month intensive Family Counselling training program.

Funds raised from the Movie Night will go towards providing training for Indigenous persons within the [...] community. Those who have been trained will interact within the community and Government funds for on-going support of the trainees have been secured.

(Extract from the poster)

While the good intentions of those promoting this venture are not in doubt, it is clear that the service providers consider that family counselling funded by government is a viable solution. This relegates the widespread social problems of inadequate resources, drug and alcohol abuse, and overcrowded houses, to individual responsibility. And while there is also a laudable intent to train and employ local people, there is also a hint of paternalism. Nowhere is there the suggestion that this town and its people might have knowledges other than counselling strategies which might more appropriately attend to some of these issues. Recommending counselling as a rehabilitative strategy and implying widespread pathology in the community demonstrate the normative, invisible centrality and discursive accusations of Whiteness in their failure to acknowledge the specificity rather than the universality of the psychology discipline and the discursive violation of Indigenous knowledge and ability.

*Indigenous Child Protection*

There are a number of direct and indirect consequences which flow from the discussion above in relation to the policy and practice of child protection in Indigenous communities and with Indigenous people. Firstly, the policy is affected by more than the presence within the social welfare system of different views on how best to deal with child protection. The current policy of mainstreaming, supported in part by a society which has not yet accepted the right of separate existence and self-determination of the First Peoples in Australia, and the debate about the viability of Indigenous communities in remote and very remote Australia, find a focus for condemnation of separate Indigenous communities in the exposure of extreme violence towards women and children. Metropolitan communities such as that which led to the Gordon Inquiry are also caught in this deliberation with its legislatively determined closure. Mainstreaming is also suggested by the call for family counselling in the poster advert above.

Secondly, and again implied by the poster above, Indigenous workers are often employed for their Indigenous skills and knowledges, yet are almost immediately required to undergo training to learn procedures or skills which will effectively over-ride these. Alternatively, they find that they are 'performance managed' to train out the Indigenous aspects for which they were desired as employees in the first place (Young, 1999a). Indigenous people are employed to provide the Indigenous context and connection to Indigenous people and communities, and then through bureaucratic processes are denied the place and opportunities to practice their Indigenous skills or advance through a career path because they lack 'accepted' skills and knowledges. Indigenous workers also are prone to being viewed by others as being the only appropriate workers to work with Indigenous families (Young, 1999b), thus effectively shifting the responsibility for solving Indigenous problems from the White to Indigenous setting (Young, 2004). Such a response marginalises both worker and client and paradoxically, both centres the problem on, and peripheralises, the experience of the clients (Young, 2003b). While there are legislative supports specifically for the employment of Indigenous people (Section 50D of the Equal Opportunity Act Western Australia) this is often overshadowed by these less visible actions and practices.

Indigenous workers who work within this system are generally trained from the Anglo-American tradition named earlier by Waldegrave (2006). That this system of training and acculturating to a world view is so pervasive and relatively unchallenged may be seen in the way models for practice, such

as anti-racist or counter-oppressive approaches, build on these theoretical explanations of the world rather than dismantle them. For example, attachment theory that holds that babies should bond with their caregivers for their healthy development is largely presented as a universal idea. This tends to guide practice, providing a rationale for long term alternative out-of-home placements in the case of parental failures. It unquestioningly builds on psychodynamic explanations of human development, despite being challenged for its monocultural propensities (Yeo, 2003). Challenges to these and other bedrock understandings are rarely made. This unchallenged dominance makes it more difficult for Indigenous people both to present and have accepted their models for practice.

Reports which note the incidence of problems in Indigenous communities have repeatedly called for better understanding of Indigenous world views, yet even here, suggestions are not made as to how those world views may be translated into practice. Very few works address this issue in Australia. A difficulty arises in asking Indigenous people to provide the solutions from their world views. Not only does this raise the potential for 'dumping', that is moving responsibility to Indigenous people for solving problems which have societal antecedents, but it also runs the risk of appropriating knowledge. White people have a history of appropriating and mis-using Indigenous knowledge, sometimes using it against Indigenous people. There is a fine line to be trod here as it is entirely appropriate to acknowledge that Indigenous people need to be included in discussions about the best way to proceed, and have strategies drawn from their ways of knowing while not giving them the sole responsibility for solving problems not of their making. At the same time it is important to be mindful that ownership of that knowledge and how to use it should remain with Indigenous people. As will be dealt with later, trying to attend to the very real issues of protecting Indigenous children from harm using Indigenous methods is not likely to be universally accepted.

### *Indigenous Voices*

Indigenous people have been at the forefront of much of the recent debate, and indeed have been those calling for action and attention. The media campaign concerning the remote town mentioned above was instigated by an Indigenous person who contacted the press with concerns. Indigenous voices have been prominent in many of the reports and inquiries mentioned earlier and they include people from communities, welfare professions, associated industries of law and justice, amongst others. These discourses are not one-dimensional, nor are they straightforward. Indigenous people have long been calling for

action to protect their children, for policies and practices that will support and promote their capabilities and their ability to take an active and productive part in the socio-political economy of Australia (Coorey, 2001; Gordon *et al.*, 2002; Pocock, 2003; SNAICC, 1996; SNAICC, 2004). There are, among these voices, those who are already on the leadership platform and those who are preparing to enter public and professional life. These include social welfare and social work professionals who have a crucial role in determining how child protection may be promoted.

### *Indigenous Social Work*

Understandably, social work is not a profession of choice for many Indigenous people, having themselves often been subject to the invasive and punishing practices of social workers. There are, however, an increasing number of both Indigenous practitioners and academics who contribute to the wider scope of social work (Hazlehurst, 1994; Lynn *et al.*, 1998; Bessarab, 2000; Gilbert, 2001). However, these are still considered by many in the academy and practice arenas to be alternative and optional. For example, there are few requirements in social work courses in universities in Australia directing students to learn specifically about working with Indigenous families. Furthermore, many of the texts themselves are unreflective about the premises which underpin the practices in use with child protection in particular. There is now sufficient analytical attention being paid elsewhere to what Mtezuka (1996) and others name as the 'Eurocentric value base' of theoretical approaches to 'child abuse' and their inappropriateness for use with non-Eurocentric children and families, to promote critique of how the White 'Eurocentric' centre of Australian social welfare practice engages with Indigenous child protection.

### *Indigenous Forms Of Caring*

Overshadowed by all these discourses is the fact and existence of a lengthy history of well-established Indigenous caring practices. That these were contradictorily denied to have existed, as well as being targets for obliteration in Australia from invasion onwards (Wilson, 1997; Brajcich, 2004), does not mean that today they have not survived and can not be found in use. The centrality of kinship systems which also include 'identified leaders, elders and strong people' (Bessarab, 2000), means that caring for children is shared between households and significant relationships between children and adults that extend beyond biological parentage. As Haebich (2000) documents, Indigenous families also had their own systems of alternate care in the case of death or other circumstances.

A recent survey of literature in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and Canada, examining models for the prevention and treatment of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities (Young, 2005a), demonstrated the use of these knowledges and practices and, in some cases, their incorporation into legislation and administrative practice. So, for example, Healing Circles in Canadian First Nations have been incorporated into child welfare practice in Canada (Wharf, 1992), and understandings of Maori family support into legislation in Aotearoa New Zealand (Waldegrave, 2006), since the early nineties. Here we start to see a divergence of policy and practice, as well as of theoretical understandings. Over the past decade, theory incorporating understandings derived from Indigenous settings has started to be taught in social work and social welfare courses. They retain their 'alternative' label in some quarters, but they are becoming increasingly influential. The Family Group Conferencing model which emerged from Maori practices in Aotearoa New Zealand has become a standard-bearer for these ways of practicing. This incorporation of Indigenous practices has yet to happen in Australia.

Following this discussion of the various intersecting discourses affecting how child protection is conceptualised in Indigenous communities, I want to turn to an examination of Whiteness theory as a possible way of moving the practice of social work forward. We may now reflect upon the three features of Whiteness theory identified earlier: Whiteness as unmarked race privilege; the accompanying material and discursive violence perpetrated on White's Others; and the possibilities for productive change offered by a 'pedagogy of Whiteness' (Giroux, 1997a).

#### WHITENESS THEORY FOR SOCIAL WORK

Unmarked White race privilege is evident in the history of social policy regarding Indigenous people in Australia in setting the policy direction and accompanying practices for protecting children. As demonstrated, this is a contested area, imbued with the values of the decision makers which have imposed a set of practices on Indigenous people in Australia in ways that dismiss Indigenous ways as having little value, or that accuse them of actively contributing to continued abuse of children. The increased incidence of child harm in Indigenous families and communities has provided sufficient rationale for decisive action which has resulted in further imposition of non-Indigenous child care and child welfare practices. It is less the use of these strategies or imposition of these methods on Indigenous people that is at issue, for many may well be useful and effective. It is more the lack of acknowledgement that these are not universal, but emanate from a raced epistemology, and further,

that the ability to impose these strategies and methods are a direct result of the privilege of race.

It is also evident that material and discursive violence continues to occur in the conditions of deprivation in which Indigenous people live and how they are portrayed. The fact of extreme material need in many Indigenous communities has been re-framed, in public debate through politicians' statements and media reporting, to construct Indigenous communities and their culture as deficient and incapable. As a central player in social problems intervention, the profession of social work is complicit in the unmarked race privilege of social policy and its continuing material and discursive violence perpetrated on Indigenous people. But it also has the potential for positive change. In this final section I wish to explore how Whiteness theory as 'performative practice' can offer social work possibilities for contributing to 'a progressive politics of reform' (Giroux, 1997a).

The performative mode offers social work the potential to redress some of its colonial inheritance. While this is more possible in some areas of its work than others, nowhere is it more urgent than in its involvement in the protection of Indigenous children from harm. Firstly, the location must be set within the academy, as Giroux does. Social work's heritage is in the coloniality of power (Mignolo, 2000), and this needs recognition, acceptance and a determination to decolonise its colonial knowledges. Critical reflection is insufficient by itself. It is also what occurs in the development of skills and the value-base of social work that is important. Not only is it essential that White social work students realise their own complicity in Whiteness through critical reflection, they must also learn to understand and develop the tools they will need to dismantle those actions which have the potential to further perpetuate the effects of Whiteness as material and discursive violence. This can be seen clearly in the occurrences in and with Indigenous communities where the standards and practices of non-Indigenous Australia are being imposed ostensibly to keep children safe. While no-one could possibly object to the need to keep children fed, clothed, schooled, healthy and included in their family lives, the means by which this is being attempted in the Northern Territory through military, medical and bureaucratic measures draw on coercively derived permissions rather than inclusive engagement with Indigenous knowledges. Instead of allowing the inclusion of Indigenous social work knowledge as alternative or additional, recognition is imperative within the academy that these knowledges have salience and value in their own right and are at least equivalent, if not superior, to the social work of the Western tradition. As already discussed, the problem of appropriating knowledge is also present here and retaining

ownership and control by Indigenous people is imperative.

Secondly, social work has a role in advocating in social policy matters. Policy practice is an activity that can bring about change in both what is done and the way it is done. Social work has an important role to provide a counter-argument to those continuing colonising activities which represent a single universal knowledge. The policies which are currently used in relation to Indigenous people and their children are policies of surveillance and subjugation, while they are being claimed by their authors as policies of deliverance and civilisation. They relate little to the knowledges of the people themselves which have become 'subalternised' (Yehia, 2006). Here decolonising practices include those which enable resistance at the same time as they provide clear new practices in the place of those which continue to colonise. We need, Yehia argues, to be wary of those practices that run risks of 'condescension' and continue to enact epistemic violence by failing to hear the knowledges which can inform policy practice.

Thirdly, as social workers we know very well the importance of listening; we sometimes have difficulty in hearing. Allowing silences in which the Other may speak is a necessary step in order for this duality of listening and hearing to occur. For a true dialogic space to be opened in which one part of the saying is not closed off, silence might represent an opportunity for this to be possible. In answering Spivak's challenge that the subaltern cannot speak because Western ontology has created the silent subaltern, Yehia quotes Saldana-Portillo:

silence does not eliminate differences. Rather it makes it possible not only for differences to emerge, but also for a universal identification in difference to take place. Silence is the site on which alterity and universality converge. (Yehia, 2006)

This suggests that silences might enable subaltern groups to be heard.

Fourthly, social work is also a practice which is founded on interpersonal interactions and working relationships. For many, this has been the experience of subordination, but new perspectives, such as the 'strengths' approaches (Connolly, 2001) which require workers to engage in partnership-working with clients, suggest that this need not be the case. I take heart from Fanon's insistence (Schmitt, 1996: 35) that the continuing racialised system of oppression is born of the objectification of the colonised resulting from the refusal of genuine human relationships. A genuine human relationship, contrarily, is based on mutuality and a deep attention to the Other (Schmitt, 1996: 48).



These are not the only practices which can provide some way forward to decolonise the interactions between Indigenous people and the social work profession in relation to child protection, but they are a start. It is evident that the workers in the story above were able to provide some of these strategies. They were able to listen and hear; they were able to engage in meaningful and genuine relationships; they were able to provide and protect a policy environment, at least at the local level, which enabled the mother and child to be shielded from the full effect of external demands for their separation, if not from the surveillance. Much more is needed to confront the resurgence of some very deeply colonising practices.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper challenges the social work profession to examine its colonising heritage and develop new practices which may assist in the decolonising process. Briskman (2007) and others have started to provide analyses of these histories and to make similar recommendations. My belief is that Whiteness theory can assist in that endeavour, for it is in the interaction with social work's Other, in the need to address child protection methods in Indigenous communities, that such actions are critical. New policy and practice directions can only further the colonial enterprise if this heritage is not seriously held up to scrutiny, its knowledges assessed for their potential for continued 'subalternisation', and resistance to the inclusion of knowledges from the 'non-West' refused.

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