

CHAPTER 1

Historical Foundations of Addressing Need: Indigenous, French, and English Traditions

Chapter Summary

This chapter focuses on the three main historical traditions that have contributed to the development of Canadian social work by exploring traditional Indigenous approaches to helping and healing, tracing the unique features of **social welfare** emerging from French traditions, and identifying the British roots of social welfare in English Canada as well as values and social contexts from which such traditions emerged. It also provides insight into the emergence of the Canadian welfare state and discusses the development of the social work profession and social work education and the impact of neoliberalism on social work practice.

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have historically had a negative experience with the social work profession, due largely to systems of colonialism and residential schooling. Well before the arrival of the first settlers, Indigenous Peoples had their own systems for addressing social issues. Through oral traditions, the practice of intergenerational teaching, and use of the **Medicine Wheel**, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have developed effective approaches to community care and healing.

For early French settlers, human welfare was considered the responsibility of individuals and families. Where relief was available it was delivered by the Catholic Church through numerous entities operating at the parish level. Services provided to those requiring assistance were differentiated according to distinctions made between the **deserving poor** and the **undeserving poor**. Among Anglo-Canadian communities in Quebec, models of charitable provision were similar to those offered by the Catholic Church, except that they tended to be organized and delivered by middle-class and wealthy women through benevolent societies.

In English-speaking Canada, similar models of relief for those living in poverty eventually developed into Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement House Movement. Influenced by the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, provision of relief to the poor had been divided between **indoor relief** and **outdoor relief**. Over time, the development of a scientific approach to alleviating poverty, the establishment of several settlement houses, and the **Social Gospel Movement** began to influence the provision of relief and to lay the foundations of the social work profession. With the consequences wrought by the Great Depression, the Canadian **welfare state** began to take shape.

Learning Objectives

The goal of this chapter is to do the following:

- Identify the origins of foundational concepts and issues of social work practice in Canada.
- Understand historical foundational concepts and issues and their application to Canadian social work practice.

- Appreciate the historical contributions of Indigenous, French-speaking, and English-speaking populations to Canadian social work philosophy and practice.
- Envision approaches to social work practice that reflect the myriad heritages of all who live in Canada.

Discussion or Debate Ideas

1. What considerations should social workers take into account when working with Indigenous Peoples?
2. Discuss examples of social services or programs in non-Indigenous social work settings that may reflect an Indigenous approach to healing and helping.
3. To what extent have contemporary social policies and social work practice been influenced by Indigenous, English, and French traditions, respectively?
4. To what extent are the principles of early social welfare reflected in social policy and social work practice today?
5. What factors have led to the professionalization of social work practice in Canada?
6. Discuss how neoliberalism has impacted social work practice on individual and systemic levels.

Class Assignments or Activities

1. In groups, have students apply concepts of the Medicine Wheel to a specific social problem (e.g., teen pregnancy, drug abuse, diabetes, etc.).
2. Have students discuss the pros and cons of taking a scientific (social diagnosis) approach to social work practice. This could be a debate with groups representing “for” and “against” sides.
3. Ask students to research a person or group mentioned in the chapter (e.g., L’Abbé Charles-Edouard Bourgeois, Mary Richmond, Jane Addams, J.S. Woodsworth, the St Vincent de Paul Society, etc.). In groups, students should present the person/group to their classmates and explain the contribution of this person/group to Canadian social welfare.
4. In small groups, have students identify where elements of “deserving” and “undeserving” characterizations of people living in poverty still exist. Why have these ideas persisted?
5. Discuss why women are more disadvantaged in economic downturns than men. Ask students to compare poverty rates of different age groups of women and men from the 2016 census. What are some factors that perpetuate the feminization of poverty?

6. Discuss how recent demographic changes in Canada's population will shape the provision of social work services. What strategies will be needed to provide appropriate care?

Recommended Videos

1. ***Discussion on Welfare (1967)* by Colin Low. 6 min 53 sec. National Film Board.**
https://www.nfb.ca/film/discussion_on_welfare

This short film is an interview about social welfare perspectives with four community members of Fogo Island, Newfoundland in 1967.

- a) What are some assumptions that the interviewer makes in the film? How can you tell? What do you think he believes about the social welfare system based on the words he uses in the interview?
- b) While not mentioned explicitly, the concept of “less eligibility” is present in the film. How is the concept presented?
- c) One community member is very vocal (woman seated on the right facing the camera). How does she perceive welfare receipt? How does she see the welfare state?
- d) What might be some of the social and economic challenges for a community like Fogo Island?

2. ***The Things I Cannot Change (1967)* by Tanya Ballantyne. 55 min. National Film Board.**
https://www.nfb.ca/film/things_i_cannot_change/

This documentary follows the Bailey family of 11 for 3 weeks in the mid-1960s. Filmed in Montreal, the story of living in poverty and the challenges the parents faced to meet their family's needs is one that echoed across Canada's major cities in the late 1960s.

- a) What are some of the employment challenges that Mr. Bailey faces?
- b) What have been the experiences of the Bailey family in seeking support? How does gender bias shape access to public assistance?
- c) What strategies does the family utilize to ensure basic needs are met?
- d) How do bias and living in poverty contribute to the incident and aftermath that jeopardize the Bailey family's well-being?

3. ***Up Against the System (1969)* by Terence Macartney-Filgate. 19 min. National Film Board.** https://www.nfb.ca/film/up_against_the_system/

This short documentary highlights the voices of people receiving public assistance and social service providers who work with them.

- a) How are recipients of public assistance seen, according to social workers? How do public assistance recipients see themselves? What are some of the views regarding whose “fault” their poverty is?
- b) Why does the case worker feel that we must “believe that [those who are poor] deserve to fail”?

- c) How can a social worker “make it hard” for someone receiving public assistance?
- d) What are some of the challenges for older adults living in poverty?

4. ***No way! Not me (1987)* by Ariadna Ochrymowych. 29 min. National Film Board.**
https://www.nfb.ca/film/no_way_not_me/

In this short documentary, former British Columbia cabinet member, social worker, activist and educator Rosemary Brown discusses the incidence of women’s poverty with high school students. Ms. Brown provides a timeline of women’s roles in the work force and in society and discusses the realities of the “feminization of poverty.”

- a) What was considered the “earliest job ghetto” for women?
- b) How are the economic and social conditions for women today compared to the time of Rosemary Brown’s speech in 1987? In what ways does the feminization of poverty still exist?
- c) How does Rosemary Brown describe the acculturation of men and women?

5. ***Jessica Jackley: Poverty, Money—and Love (2010)*. 18 min 30 sec. TED Talks.**
http://www.ted.com/talks/jessica_jackley_poverty_money_and_love

What are your perspectives on people who live in poverty? Jessica Jackley, co-founder of Kiva.org, talks about what changed her attitudes over time.

- a) What were Jessica Jackley’s early perspectives on poverty and people who lived in poverty? What changed her views?
- b) How does she see “help”?
- c) In what ways can economic development and social work partner together to address poverty in Canadian communities? What are some challenges of considering historical perspectives on poverty and people living in poverty in Canada?