

## CHILD WELFARE AND THE SOCIAL CARE SYSTEM: A Practice-based Qualitative Research Paper (PRP): STUDY CONDUCTED IN ONTARIO - CANADA

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**Abstract:** This elaborate paper explores the lack of mediation and reunification for Black Crown wards and their families. The researchers took sources of literature and information from a variety of databases to get a handle on what the authors are saying about reunification for Black Crown wards. Examples of the search engines and data maps were from ProQuest, EBSCO, Google Scholars, and some other grey materials that were highly related to the subject area since is a green area of research in academia. In all 250 articles were sorted but only 45 had similar to the researchers area of interest in relation to this sensitive research topic.

Data collected for this PRP confirms hypotheses around child welfare and some of the inadequacies and challenges that Black Crown ward survivors face. There is lack of family restoration in Black Crown ward cases. Some survivors do not want reunification, while others want it. For those who want or/and need reunification, there is a gap of help that exists in their lives. Lack of therapy and counseling has meant more trauma and unresolved feelings for all involved.

The narratives relayed by the participants all point to the inadequacies of the social care system. The child welfare system is insufficient in providing seamless support to Black Crown ward survivors.

**Keywords:** Child protection workers, Black crown wards, Foster parents, Adoptive parents.

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## **Introduction**

What is a Crown ward? A Crown ward is made as such, owned by or under the care of the state, when they are removed from their household and placed in a government-run facility (i.e., foster care, residential care, group home). The child is removed from their immediate family and works with child protection workers and/or foster/adoptive parents. Access arrangements guide family relationships and dynamics, potentially maintaining ties to family of origin (Savoie, 2006). Safety and wellbeing of the child, as well as restoring family ties and old relationships, is a goal of child welfare and protection services. Deeply listening to child welfare survivors is important, as pertinent information is relayed in knowledge-making and dialogue. Precisely, it is the lived experience of Black Crown wards that illuminate problems, contradictions, and meaning-making involved in child welfare relationships.

While listening to the Black children, it is vital that families and children are closely tied, so that restoration in relationships can take place. The “best interests” of children need to be taken in to consideration, as the language of best interests is what guides ontologies for practice. Social workers and aspiring social workers must navigate the child welfare system to go through some of the concepts and experiences that undergird Black Crown wardship. “Best interests” elucidate some of the complexities of family problems and conflict, or dysfunctional families. Families are complicated, with histories and stories of happiness, solace, and balance. Sometimes, families have a history of abuse which can be intergenerational (2017, October 3; 2018, June 22). This precariousness can be linked to other social determinants of health and personhood.

Three (3) formulations or keywords came out in the literature examined for this practice based paper (PRP): colonization, families, and justice. One of the recurring concepts explored is “trauma”. The researchers used this term to talk about periods of overwhelming feelings, where high agitation is the result of a unique experience of an event. Trauma can be conceptualized as a discourse, informed by histories of colonialism and generational harm and violence. It affects sectors and domains like spirituality, physical health, and mental health (Trauma-informed: The trauma toolkit, 2013; Maxwell, 2014; Suarez, 2011). In the light of the critical thinking and Black knowledge used in this PRP, trauma was conceptualized as historical and contingent on characteristics such as class, racism, and abuse. It is important to centre the knowledges of Black people in studies of Black people.

This gave merit and power to what the researchers are said as Black scholars, and the significance of race and colour in child welfare discourses. Black non-scholars also chipped in their ideas and energies, contributing to a rich and forceful practice of knowledge sharing. In Canadian context, the best interests of children are safeguarded by Canadian authority and policy (Act of 1975). The Canadian government has the responsibility to ensure children are looked after. What is missing in this set of relations is restorative justice. Restoration happens when families, disrupted by child protection, come together to emotionally support one another through kinship. This brings security and a sense of self-worth, dignity, and other qualities as outlined by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW).

Child protection services like the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) are active players in affecting families. These families can already be multi-risk (Landy & Menna, 2006a), already disruptive and dysfunctional. CAS and social workers can get in to the way of complicating family disruption by not reconstituting families. There can be a gap in the family reconstitution process, where the in-between state of having been systematically removed, rejected, or/and abandoned impacts people and kinships involved. These people can be social workers, as evidenced in examples of compassionate fatigue and trauma experiences. They can also be family members, like parents, grandparents, and children (Salloum, Kondrat, Johnco, & Olson, 2015). Blended families challenge the nuclear family, which has been the support and underpinning of many systemic interventions. The nuclear family is closely tied to scientific epistemologies, psychiatrization, medicalization, and theoretical, conceptual, and methodological frameworks guiding ways of dealing with children. Kinships affected by child welfare, however it takes shape (Crown wardship, “orphanhood”, adoption), are impacted by systems and policies mired in Adultcentrism, where the look and lens of the adult guides ways of being young. There is a lack of counseling services and policies apparent in the lives of Crown wards who have been systematically removed from their clan, home, or/and family (Clarke, 2012). The liminal space of having been removed/abandoned/rejected is crucial for social workers and educators. These are some of the kinships related to child welfare and protection, and part of the implications for social work. Social workers can learn new knowledge around child protection to better their practices around young people affected by Crown wardship, orphanhood, adoption, etc.

## **Colonization and Trauma**

Trauma can be said to have been wrought and implemented by imperialism and colonization (Jeffrey, 2002). Trauma existed prior to European conquest and the implementation of Britishness, as evidenced by class dynamics. Elitism is when people are divided in classes and power reigns over the population. Trauma is at play when people suffer on the basis of unequal power dynamics. Overwhelming feelings, unresolved, are unfinished business that attests to an unequal playing field. Class dynamics are closely tied to unsettled events as they impact individuals (Trauma-informed: The trauma toolkit, 2013). High agitation and distress are universal experiences, so, it is not solely imperialism and colonization that brought about trauma formation and production. Clans, families, and closely knit groups are susceptible to trauma as distress exists across different times and spaces, in different places.

Barker, Alfred, and Kerr (2014) talk about the legacy of imperial power and colonial practices in the lives of Indigenous children. Here, trauma is conceptualized as a result of colonization, the colonial state of governmentality that rules over others on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and ability. In this state, the “Other” is painted as not-the-Self, which results in the Other’s abjection and exclusion from the colonial state. The legacies of this are representations of “the Indian”, which informs many imaginaries, knowledge bases, and ways of being, in 2019 in Canada. Troubles like addiction, poverty, homelessness, and misogyny result of colonization (Barker, Alfred, & Kerr, 2014). It is no stranger that the Sixties Scoop happened and disrupted families and young people. Indigenous children were taken away from their homes to go in a milieu Anglophone and Francophone, very British and French. This trauma is still impactful today, as survivors of the Sixties Scoop document their experiences of the forced removal

from their landscape and ontology of being. Race is central here. Indigenous children are overrepresented as youth in care (Barker et al., 2014). Indigeneity and race are correlates in child protection. As Native children are overrepresented in care, reserves are also sites of vulnerability. Indigenous children are vulnerable citizens who challenge representations of “the child” on the reserve (Barker et al., 2014, p. E533). Colonization possesses the present by being based on race, gender, and sexual orders. The “unfit” Indian or Other embodies the different correlates that mire and sustain ontologies of being today.

A lot of pressure is put on the backs of Others like people of colour and disabled people. Using an anti-colonial lens, Stewart (2016) also brings home the centrality of race to the present. Race organizes the present. It is an order. Stewart’s (2016)’s piece relates to Fanonian theory, and W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness. Double consciousness, in the context of the Black man, means that Black people’s way of seeing the world might be informed by Whiteness. Whiteness is the standard by which other characteristics (e.g. employment and relationships) are measured. Though “the black man” is the anchor in these critical race texts, it is applicable to other contexts of Blackness and disenfranchisement. The race order, for Gavi in Stewart’s (2016) study, is difficult to deal with, as Gavi longs for a parent who will connect with him. This metaphor represents kinship, which is pivotal for kids. Kinship serves the need for love, care, and connection. Gavi is a poor kid who has nostalgia for a mom who will look after him. As a Black child, Gavi could go back to colonization and slavery to make sense of his ontology.

As Tyrka, Wier, Price, Ross, and Carpenter (2008) put it: “Unanticipated detachment from primary caregivers places the child’s world and sense of stability into an immediate state of uncertainty” (as cited in Stewart, 2016, p. 111). Precarious embodiment is a thing. Gavi embodies this precariousness when he feels sad, disappointed, unworthy, and resentful toward his mother, whom “was never there” (so the discourse goes) to give him stability and security. Gavi is one of the many Black children who are overrepresented in care. It could be said that Black people and Indigenous peoples share a common struggle when anger and a sense of belonging arises from their narratives and stories. Colonization has really impacted families (Pihama, Nana, Cameron, Smith, Reid, & Southey, 2016). It is a detrimental system to family relationships because families tend to be non-hierarchical in terms of kinship and affective ties. Though patriarchies and matriarchies presuppose “power over”, there is the innate, essential, or timeless occurrence of kinship and care amongst family members. Phenomenologically, families move through space and time together, as whole, however blended, extended, or dispersed. The family is a system that works on micro, mezo, and macro levels. The lingering quality of colonization in systems like the family speaks to the need to talk about the event, the trauma, in proceedings of family reconstitutivity and restoration. If the feeling is that colonization helped “scoop up” children from their homes, and still continues to do so by the agency of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism, colonialism must be foregrounded in discussions of how to fill the gap in families torn apart by regimes.

Child removal, rejection, and abandonment are tricky things as they are mired in systems.

Policies dictate that children must be protected. But there is little protection that takes place once the damage has been made. This damage can be inherent to the family (re: disrupted or dysfunctional family), but this damage can also be precipitated by child protection services. What happens to the family in child removal orders?

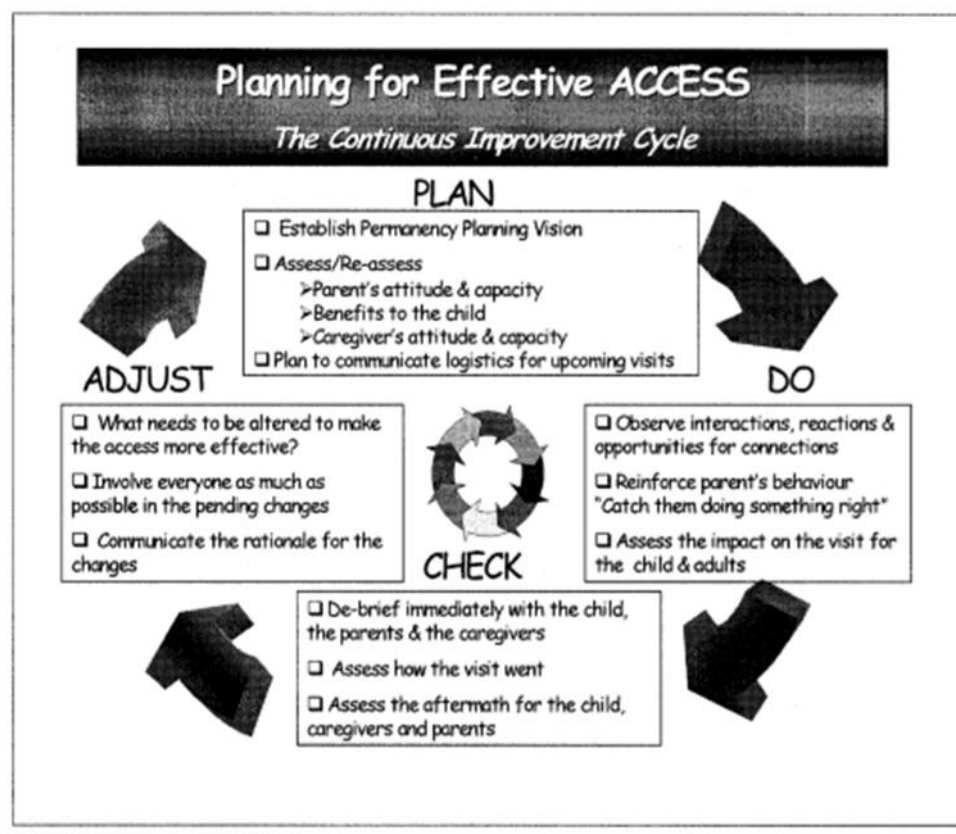
## **Families and Access**

Savoie (2006) talks about “family connectivity”. Family connectivity refers to the process by which restoration, in families, takes place. Restoration can take the form of kinship building.

It would be cruel and inaccurate to state that “kinship building” are timeless occurrences in family restoration processes. What the researchers mean by that is that family restoration is an illusion when there is an idea of child protection services working “for” families and their interests. Child protection workers and services have not much connectivity in the lives of Crown wards, adoptees, and foster children. As Savoie (2006) states: “Child welfare is a reactive and crisis driven service and when the initial crisis is over, resources do not seem to be directed to the ongoing long term [sic] needs of the family” (p. 3). Child protection orders are not a be-all end-all, as ties, amidst a family disruption, can continue to be severed and not conducive to healthy family restoration. Using Nighswander and Proulx’s (2007) health paradigm, healthy families happen and are formed when kinship takes place amidst a familial formation. There would be no abuse and violence here, simply positive kinships. Authoritative parenting is different from authoritarian parenting, as the former is about setting boundaries and limits for children. Authoritarian parenting edges on abuse, as per health and family conceptual frameworks (Nighswander and Proulx, 2007). Health paradigms are closely aligned with restorative justice in families affected by child protection orders. Health is the paradigm working closely with family restoration and reconstituting ties. One thing that Savoie (2006) talks about is access arrangements. Access arrangements are pivotal when restoring families and ensuring family reconnectedness. This is because access arrangements are laden with power dynamics. Power circulates and revitalizes people involved in child welfare proceedings, such that many people have to inform the new vision of the dysfunctional family survivor.

The vision of the survivor is tailored to family kinships; it is reinforced when people like social workers and educators are involved in the survivor’s life. Access arrangements are changing and need to be reevaluated (Savoie, 2006, p. 3).

The players of a survivor’s journey possess shifting identities. Sometimes, for example, they are hurt by family disruption. As such, family disruption models ontologies of being as families have the potential to be reconstituted and restored. Access arrangements bring families back together, whether biological parents visit their surviving children, or social workers help survivors of child welfare navigate the system (see, e.g., Burge, 1999).



**Figure 1: Planning for effective access model (Savoie, 2006, p. 18)**

This chart illustrates the best interests of the child being used in a model for access. In order for this chart or process to be effectively used, child protection workers need to have knowledge of the theory and historical facts behind best or optimum practices. This could ensure that the relationship between Crown wards and their families is not fractured further.

Access continues to bring justice in the circumstances of families and kinship systems. Separation does not do well as a family restoration technique; indeed, it disconnects a family and risks exposing kids to multiple vulnerabilities (e.g. HALTBS -- am I hungry, angry, lonely, tired, bored, or/and stressed?).

Multi-risk children are mired in survivorship; they are brave souls that respond to family dispersal and discontinuity. Child protection standards are hardly in line with family restoration. What would a radical family restoration technique look like? Trauma-informed services make a difference (Barnett, Cleary, Butcher, & Jankowski, 2018; Murphy, Anderson, Redd, & Malm, 2017). Access, then, could be layered with trauma-informed services. We know that access is regulated and there is no escaping that at this point in time in Canada (Savoie, 2006, p. 14).

But it is important to talk about history behind "child protection standards". These standards do not do a good job highlighting intersectionality. They obfuscate overrepresentation on the basis of these correlates. It looks like imperialism is indeed behind child protection standards and practices, as child welfare is rooted in White and British racial orders. Family reunification is born of oppression wrought by colonial relations (Landertinger, 2017). Child welfare is based on White norms. Canadian context undermines minority people by supporting doctrines that trace back

to European conquest, which breaches CASW's Code of Ethics. Family reunification is tender, soft, and about ties to the clan/system of origin (Savoie, 2006, p. 6). Compassion is at the heart of the child welfare system, as affective ties guide principles of justice. Precisely, it is attachment theory and separation that inform family reconstitution and family destruction or deconstitution (Savoie, 2006, p. 6). Sometimes, as Blitz (2006a) highlights, people associated with the child welfare system have to navigate the system in order to better the system. Using concepts, arguments, and sources proposed by legislation, for example, is what child kinships have to resort to doing. Child welfare sets the scene for complex dynamics, so, it is this layered quality that brings home some level of connectivity. Although connectivity is not a metaphor, there are many ways of seeing the concept, and it is brutally embodied in the lives of Crown wards, for example (Savoie, 2006, p. 8).

Historically, colonization and colonialism have disenfranchised Indigenous people, Black people, trans people, and other minorities. As such, researchers were critical of scientific paradigms, as they are informed by colonial, racial, gender, etc. politics. Psychiatric, medical, and quantitative conceptual frameworks fail to represent the lived experiences and realities of minorities, as feminist, intersectional, and postmodern forebears have shown us. While quantitative measures like surveys and questionnaires do the job of representing numbers and statistics on, say, mental health (e.g. Barnett, Cleary, Butcher, & Jankowski, 2018), they pose the risk of whitewashing, watering down, and diluting crucial vital experiences of race, gender, and class (Barker, Alfred, & Kerr, 2014). Epistemologies need to be unsettled ("unsettling the settler within") to avoid risking reinscribing Whiteness, racial capitalism, and the wretchedness of minorities.

Interviews bring home lived experiences of exclusion. As Nourian, Shahbohlghi, Tabrizi, and Rassouli (2016) put it, there is something spiritual about resilience in the face of child welfare. Empowerment from the ground up takes place when people relay information that is about their daily reality of shelter, access, and God (Nourian et al., 2016; Morrison, Mishna, Cook, & Aitken, 2011; Tilley, 2016). The scholarly articles and documents consulted for this literature assessment did superb at drawing special importance to change and social transformation. These documents used narrative therapy and theory, interviews, focus groups, and content analysis to carve out space for new ways of being in relation. These trenchant methods were rooted in postmodern praxes, with a focus on blended theories and methods and mixed methods. This balance helped illustrate the layeredness of child protection in the context of transnational systems of care. Care is universal; so is, unfortunately, colonization (Pihama et al., 2016). So, methodologies have to be intersectional if they truly want to assess the impact of child welfare. Child protection is global, personally and collectively. Traditions of postmodernism informed many of the methodologies looked at for his PRP. It is not surprising, as postmodernism is grounded in concepts such as “fluidity” (Morrison, Mishna, Cook, & Aitken, 2011). Social constructionism, critical race theory, and Indigenous philosophy all ground the anti-colonial lenses curated while researching, for example, the reunification process. Researches did well not drawing too much on positivism to navigate territory pertaining to child protection services. Postmodernism is post-positivist. Deep interviews and discourse evaluation speak to profound listening, which is valorized in family restoration practices (Savoie, 2006; Stewart, 2016). This qualitative aspect comes out strongly in research explored for my PRP. Qualitative measures bring about facts that strike the researcher, hence researcher positionality and reflexivity. Qualitative measures are ascribed value in child welfare research discourses because the phenomenological, embodied knowledge of “knowing” or “psychology” (affect) is special and cannot always be measured by numbers (pointing to quantitative data and measures). Ideally, a blend of quantitative and qualitative material does the work of highlighting differences, similarities, and productive discrepancies between methodologies and conceptual frameworks (Blitz, 2006a; Hunt, Moretti, Booth, & Reyda, 2018). Methodologically and conceptually, methods, theories, ideas, and practices were all over the map, as I curated documents for my PRP. The researchers were not overly picky in their resources; the topic was limited and not much is “known” about kinships as they relate to child welfare and implications for social work. It’s about decolonizing methodologies and realizing that methods and traditions have to be “queered” (Berila, 2016) to present new and trenchant pedagogies (Coleman, Jackson, Gun, & Grass, 2014; Big Plume, 2008). It is believe child welfare kinships exist and function in a political climate that is very neoliberal.

If institutions like grant bodies cut funding and put the onus on families to bear the “problem” of “the child”, what happens to social welfare? Child welfare and children’s best interests are not placed in a paramount position, but kept at bay (Swift & Parada, 2004). It is important that child positions and youth work are re-valorized in neoliberal discourses because justice and equity sound like goals in positive child welfare reform (Swift & Parada, 2004, p. 15-16). Bringing methodologies and theories together makes room for flexibility around research goals. That principle can be translated in to practice by talking about and prioritizing symbiotic frameworks. If frameworks are made intersectional and connective

with one another and phenomena outside of themselves (phenomenology), then, coalitions and solidarities can take place. Alliances reduce vulnerabilities to poverty, homelessness, trauma, by forging links and connectivities amongst people and across differences. It is in this spirit that the researchers wrote this PRP: to better the lives of kids and social workers and educators involved in child protection. There has to be some form of restoration in place to re-forge the ties that may have been destroyed by child welfare intervention (the premise of this PRP). Bringing awareness and consciousness to the plethora of racialized children in the system is part of my intention in this research project. People connected to child welfare have a share in (colonial) protection services. Imperial legacies must be talked about when tracing the history of protection services. Restorative justice mends disrupted families and family ties. Families can be reconstituted through emotional labour and new practices. Counseling needs to be in place to be a “safety net” for disrupted families and individuals. Resources must be provided to better the support around child welfare survivorship.

## Conclusion

The researchers admit and agree with (Savoie, 2006) that Child welfare discourses presuppose protecting children, but family reunification is a big part of the deconstitution that takes place amidst families in a diverse society. Colonization has proven to support, or buttress, a lot of languages that are used to paint a picture of child psychology. Legal speech acts purport to protect the “humanity” of children, where child psychology is based on “meaningful relationships”. But the very act of family separation is a profound intervention in to children’s ways of being. So, child psychology is formed through discourses. Judges and attorneys, the police service, social care system by registered social workers, religious leaders and churches, health care systems, and community at large together are guards, strict barriers and bridges that “protect” children’s rights, integrity, well-being and this integrity is constituted by the very mechanisms that organize courts, institutions, and values.

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