The Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
School of Public Administration

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2002  University of Calgary  MSW
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“Empowered or Tokenized? The Experiences of Aboriginal Human Service Workers and Organizational Responses in a Historically Oppressive Child Welfare System”

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Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Evert Lindquist, School of Public Administration, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Leslie Brown, School of Social Work, UVic (Member)
Dr. Michael Prince, Faculty of Human and Social Development, UVic (Outside Member)

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Dr. Venkatesh Srinivasan, Department of Computer Science, UVic
Abstract

Government human service organizations regularly attempt to recruit ethnically and culturally diverse professionals to improve services to diverse communities. The assumption here is that organizational culture and structure support this organizational practice. This study considers the unique challenge for Aboriginal professionals who work within a government child welfare system responsible for the oppression of Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

As a non-Aboriginal organizational insider and researcher, I use a combined Indigenous/ethnographic approach to explore these issues with Aboriginal professionals within the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). This study involves a dual focus that examines the history, identity, values, motivations, and practice approaches of Aboriginal professionals as well as how organizational structural and environment variables support or impede their representation of community needs and interests. Analysis of these two areas results in significant findings for the organization, the social work profession, and various practice and organizational diversity literatures.

Aboriginal participant descriptions of values, beliefs, and motivations strongly shared with their representative group: to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in government care and reconnect them to community.

Aboriginal participant role tensions and dual accountabilities, resulting from their unique community/Ministry insider/outsider position, provide context to studies that explore tensions and contradictions that exist for diverse professionals working within their communities through mainstream organizations.

Findings also contribute to studies in representative bureaucracy and other organizational diversity approaches concerned with the ability of diverse professionals to actively represent community interests. Organizational variables, such as low Aboriginal practice support, racism, cultural incompetence, hierarchical structure and decision making, risk-averse practice norms, poorly implemented rhetorical change initiatives, and institutional physical environments, among others, impede the ability of Aboriginal participants to actively represent community interests. Mitigating factors were found where some Aboriginal participants describe significant organizational support at the worksite level through dedicated culturally competent Aboriginal management and practice teams.