

What is Decolonization?

Let me be clear right from the beginning: I AM NOT AN EXPERT. I am a white privileged woman, entering into this conversation with a great deal of trepidation and a certain amount of anxiety. My goal is that we will learn and ask some questions together, in hopes that this article will help all of us to look at our world and work in a different way. I will inevitably ruffle some feathers and say something stupid – but I hope that we can enter this conversation bravely and be willing to learn (and unlearn) together.

Phew... even that was stressful to write!

OK – with that said, let's take a look at the idea of de-colonization and what it means for us personally and for the social serving sector.

What is decolonization? To understand that term, let's first understand what colonization means:

Colonization: the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area; the action of appropriating a place or domain for one's own use.

In Canada, colonization was accomplished through various means: removing Indigenous people from their land, “removing the Indian from the child” through residential schools, banning cultural practices and ceremonies, outlawing Indigenous languages, the intentional spread of disease, writing laws that treated Indigenous people as animals and the list goes on. It is not unreasonable to say that in Canada, genocide was perpetrated through the colonization process.

Unfortunately, we cannot shake our

heads and say that it all happened “back then.”

Colonization, and the effects of colonization, are still in effect.

Consider:

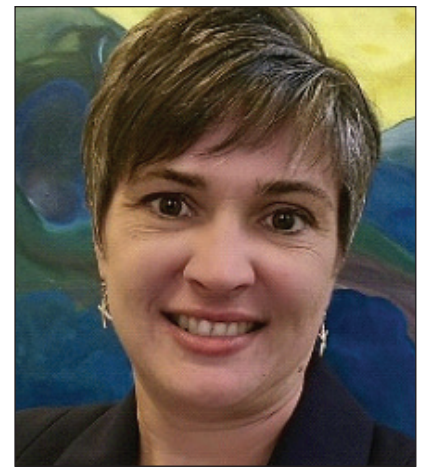
- the lack of clean water on reserves,
- the lack of health care and services on reserves,
- the continued removal of Indigenous children from their homes and community,
- the lack of resources for Indigenous communities to educate their children in their language and cultural practices,
- the stigma and racism that Indigenous people experience every day in every community across Canada... and the list goes on.

Patriarchal actions of Canada towards First Nations are still happening today.

So, what is decolonization?

The dictionary definition is: *the action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent.* Huh. Somehow that seems inadequate. There's got to be more to this than just withdrawal. What about all the damage that has been done? The generational trauma? The effects of economic and cultural racism? What about restitution?

For most of us in the social serving sector – and really anyone who has a conscience – we will want to address this problem. But is it our problem to fix? There is a big difference between “fixing” a problem and being held accountable



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and stepping up to be part of the solution.

Reconciliation is the process by which relationships are restored. This is the work of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (nctr.ca). It is also the work of each one of us – to learn and unlearn, to recognize the colonial lens through which we see and to find ways, both professionally and personally to decolonize. This is a process – one that requires guidance and leadership from Indigenous people. We must learn from them before we can consider what needs to be done. A good way to start is to read and educate ourselves about Indigenous people. Here are a couple resources:

- University of Calgary: Indigenous Canada Course (free)
- Four Seasons of Reconciliation Course: <https://www.reconciliationeducation.ca/>

I encourage you to ask yourself how your beliefs and mindset about Indigenous people affect the way you work, live and interact with your community. In what areas are you affected by a colonial lens? Feel free to contact me with your thoughts – let's be brave together!

We all have skeletons in our closet. Most of us would be quite content to leave them there, in the dark. It is so much less painful to ignore them.

The organization I work for is almost 150 years old. Our roots are firmly planted in colonization. But, whether an organization is 150 or 15 years old, there are undoubtedly policies, actions or statements

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that have been hidden away in shame. The question is, what do we do with them? Do we pull them into the light of day and display them for all to see or do we try to bury them deeper in hopes that they are never found? Neither option is appealing and both can result in a loss of reputation, supporters and funding.

With our 150-year history – and with volumes of archives and photos to sift through – we have decided to hire an outside archivist to do a deep dive into our history. All the skeletons will be pulled into the open, at which time we can carefully decide what to do with them. Will there be some kind of public statement of our role in colonialism? Probably. Will there be acts of reconciliation and restitution? Undoubtedly. Will there be humble requests for forgiveness? Absolutely.

Part of our history is our beautiful heritage brick building, built in 1891. It has housed children and seniors and been the centre of our organization. We love it and have taken great efforts to maintain it as an important part of our history. Unfortunately, it also bears a strong resemblance to many of the residential schools that were built in the same era. How many Indigenous people have been triggered just by looking at our building? We aren't going to demolish the building – so what can we do to make it a more welcoming space for Indigenous people? This is a question we are mulling over.

- How do your physical spaces welcome Indigenous people?
- Is there more that you can do to create a welcoming and safe place?

Many organizations have written land acknowledgements in an effort to honour the Indigenous people of their area. However, this also has some controversy attached to it. Is acknowledging that you have forcefully taken something that isn't yours enough? Doesn't there need to be restitution or at the very least, an apology? In any other context, we would be paying rent to the land owner to live and work on their property. Does this need to be a part of the reconciliation process?

I think the concept of reconciliation can mean many different things. My ideas of how to make amends will be very different from yours, and likely also very different from the Indigenous community.

Therefore, while we can ask all kinds of questions about our history, our physical spaces, and how we live and work in our community, the core of the reconciliation process needs to be guided and led by the Indigenous community. "Nothing for us without us."

Probably the most important thing we can do as an organization is to work in partnership with an Indigenous elder or knowledge keeper to guide us in this process. And let me be clear – we need to generously compensate this person for the work they are going to do with us. We cannot expect the Indigenous community to do the work for us – we must be ready to dig in, face the skeletons and come up with an appropriate way to make restitution. This is OUR work to do – with the guidance and direction of the people most impacted by our colonial history.

- What can you do to learn more about your organizational history?
- What kind of skeletons need to be dealt with?
- Do you have Indigenous partners who can guide you with this process?

"We've always done it that way." This statement is commonly heard in all social profit organizations. It is so much easier to do things as they have always been done than to change. However, it is also an opportunity to explore why we have always done it "that way." If we dig a bit deeper, we find that traditions or legacies are often rooted in paternalism and colonialism (as well as other "isms" like ableism, heteronormative-ism etc). Changing is HARD WORK, but changing how an organization does things is particularly difficult, especially when processes and policies have been around for a long time. However, the work needs to be done.

One of the first questions we asked ourselves when we started the process of decolonization is how many of our staff and clients are Indigenous. We were surprised how low the numbers were in both categories. For an organization that touches over 2,000 lives, a very small percentage are Indigenous. So then, we had to ask ourselves WHY?

- Are our services not relevant or needed by Indigenous people?
- Are Indigenous people receiving similar services from Indigenous-led organizations?

The answer to both questions was no. That made it clear to us that Indigenous people are not accessing our services for other reasons. Some potential barriers include:

- Our building looks like a residential school
- Our Christian heritage
- The way we provide services may not be in line with Indigenous culture
- Our application/intake process

We also had to consider that the predominantly white faces of our staff could be a barrier. The percentage of Indigenous staff was even smaller than clients, so we needed to ask some questions about that too:

- Do we have a culturally safe place to work?
- Do we value diversity?
- Do we have barriers that make it difficult for Indigenous people to apply for jobs?

As you can see, at this point, there are a lot of questions and not a lot of answers.

As we move forward in this process, I think the most important part is our attitude. We need to be humble and vulnerable, willing to look at the hard things that we have done and look for culturally appropriate ways to make amends. Are we going to make mistakes? YES! Are we going to offend people? Undoubtedly. Is the work going to be hard? Very much so. Is it worth it? A resounding yes!

Thanks for joining me in this conversation about decolonization. Please share your thoughts and experiences at jlinka@cridge.org.

Let's all be brave and humble together on this journey towards reconciliation.

Joanne Linka is the Manager of Communication and Fund Development at The Cridge Centre for the Family in Victoria BC. She loves to dig into systemic issues and look for solutions that benefit the wider community. She can rant on any number of issues at the drop of a hat. When not working, Joanne is reading, in the garden or pestering her children.

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The article has been edited for this publication.