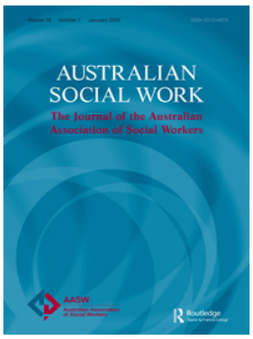

Australian Social Work

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rasw20

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To cite this article: Karen Holl, Christine Fejo-King, Margarita Frederico & Sarah MacLean (19 Feb 2025): Aboriginal Australians' Perceptions of Non-Aboriginal Social Workers: Challenges and Solutions, Australian Social Work, DOI: 10.1080/0312407X.2025.2453200

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2025.2453200

Published online: 19 Feb 2025.

AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK
https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2025.2453200

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Aboriginal Australians' Perceptions of Non-Aboriginal Social Workers: Challenges and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Social work with Aboriginal Australians presents significant challenges for non-Aboriginal social workers, due to complex historical, cultural, and political factors. This article explores the perceptions of 13 Aboriginal Australians who participated in a qualitative study examining how non-Aboriginal social workers navigate the challenges of contemporary practice. Aboriginal participants identified the following issues: that non-Aboriginal social workers had limited understanding of the ongoing impacts of colonisation and of child removal, that racist attitudes endure, and that culturally safe practice is not always evident. They described receiving insufficient support for self-determination from social workers and noted a tendency for social workers to disregard the impacts of their own professional power. Participants made corresponding suggestions for improvement: that social workers should be open to learning from Aboriginal Australians and willing to engage in honest and authentic relationships, and that universities and training organisations should provide more comprehensive preparation for social work practice with Aboriginal Peoples. By centring the voices of Aboriginal Australians, this article offers insights and suggestions for how social work can better serve and support the self-determination of Aboriginal Australians.

IMPLICATIONS

- Listening to and learning from Aboriginal people is critical to improved social work practice.
- Being trustworthy and building authentic relationships where power imbalances are dealt with honestly supports good practice.
- Social work training should include comprehensive education on ongoing effects of racist policies, particularly child removal.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 September 2024
Accepted 9 January 2025

KEYWORDS
Aboriginal; Aboriginal Australians; Australia; Critical Reflection; Cultural Safety; Social Workers; Self-Determination; Racist Policies; Authentic Relationships; Mutual Learning; Listening; Social Work Education; Child Removal; Professional Power; Colonisation

Invasion and colonisation have shaped the contemporary challenges faced by Aboriginal Australians. For more than two centuries Aboriginal Australians have experienced dispossession of land, forced removal of children, cultural genocide, and systemic discrimination. Successive reports and inquiries such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal

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Deaths in Custody (1991), *Bringing Them Home* (1997) and more recently Victoria's *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems* (2023) reiterate that historical traumas continue to reverberate through generations, shaping social dynamics; cultural identity; and individual, family and community wellbeing.

In relation to forced child removal, it has been estimated that between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from families and communities from 1910 to 1970 (HEROC, 1997). The reasons for removing Aboriginal children have been documented elsewhere (Newton, 2020), but it is widely accepted that these actions, even where unintended by those enacting them, were authorised by assimilationist policies related to the attempted genocide of Aboriginal Australians (Bennett & Green, 2019). These devastating actions continue to negatively influence Aboriginal families today (Willmot et al., 2024). Furthermore, it is estimated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are currently nearly six times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be reported to child protection and continue to be overrepresented in the out-of-home care system (SNAICC, 2023).

The racist attitudes towards Aboriginal people that underlie colonisation continue today (Taylor & Habibis, 2020). Institutional racism towards Aboriginal Australians exists in all domains of Australian society, including education, welfare, housing, and the criminal justice system often with devastating consequences (Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2024). Hence, Aboriginal Australians face systemic barriers to accessing quality services and opportunities, including in the human service organisations that employ social workers, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and marginalisation.

Social work practice with Aboriginal Australians is influenced by these historical injustices, ongoing inequalities, and cultural complexity (Bennett & Green, 2019). Furthermore, the relationship between Aboriginal Australians and social workers has been significantly negatively influenced by mistrust associated with the profession's involvement in child removal (Harms et al., 2011). The literature suggests that non-Aboriginal social workers are falling short with regards to their efforts to engage effectively with Aboriginal service users and colleagues despite the best efforts of some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers to improve contemporary practice (Bennett & Green, 2019).

Positionality

The authorship team comprises four qualified and experienced social workers. The first author is a non-Aboriginal social worker with many years of frontline experience with Aboriginal families and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Victoria. The second author is a Larrakia elder and social worker from Darwin, who has worked with and advocated for Aboriginal families across Australia for decades. The third and fourth authors are non-Aboriginal social work academics, who have a history of engagement with Aboriginal peoples and organisations.

Method

Study Design

The study's design was influenced by Indigenous research principles like those identified by Rigney (1999) in his pioneering work that highlighted the importance of privileging

Indigenous voices. A transformative approach was used, that emphasises understanding the experience of participants and views research as a moral and political activity that requires a commitment to social justice and human rights (Romm, 2015).

Recruitment and Sample

This article draws on data collected as part of a PhD study by the first author which was completed in 2022. Thirteen Aboriginal Australians who had experience with non-Aboriginal social workers were recruited for this study. Participants were recruited from three organisations: two ACCOs and one mainstream community service. All organisations gave written permission for involvement. Key informants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) identified potential participants who were provided with information about the study and agreement to participate was obtained via written consent.

Data Collection and Procedure

Individual semistructured interviews influenced by the Aboriginal concept of "yarning" were conducted by the first author, a non-Aboriginal social worker, with guidance from the second author, an experienced Aboriginal social worker, to explore Aboriginal participants' perceptions of non-Aboriginal social workers. "Yarning" is a data collection tool that has been used in semistructured interviews, which focuses on relationship building—so it is important in research that includes Aboriginal Australians and even more so where research is conducted by non-Aboriginal social workers, where mistrust can frame the relationship (Bessarab & Ng'Andu, 2018).

At the time of the interviews, 11 of the 13 participants were employed in various roles across three organisations. Two participants identified themselves as service users only. However, as has been found in other research with Aboriginal Australians (MacLean et al., 2017), all Aboriginal participants reflected on their experiences as both colleagues and service users. Aboriginal participants who were interviewed for this study are listed in Table 1.

Interviews were structured around key questions concerning Aboriginal Australians' experiences of working with non-Aboriginal social workers. Although, 17 non-

Table 1 Aboriginal Participants, the Pseudonyms Used to Identify them and their Employment Roles

Participant	Role
Alannah	Case Manager/Team Leader
Samantha	Case Manager
Kerry	Case Manager/Team Leader
Craig	Case Manager/Social Worker
Marg	Service User
Donna	Case Manager
Mike	Case Manager
Jill	Case Manager
Barb	Case Manager/Social Work Student
Kay	Service User
Sadie	Administrative Worker
Ann	Social Worker
Cathy	Case Manager

Aboriginal social workers also were interviewed for this study and their responses triangulated the analysis, these interviews are not directly referenced in this article.

Data Analysis

Two forms of analysis were employed to explore the data. The first of these was a micro-analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to develop the themes within and across the interviews. For this, each interview was read, and each sentence was numbered sequentially, noting on paper repeated words and ideas first within and then across each interview. As each interview was reviewed those words, sentences, and ideas that occurred most often formed the basis of the themes.

Our second approach to analysis was inspired by "The Listening Guide" (Gilligan, 1982); a four-stage process of data analysis. This method intersected with some important values and assumptions of the research approach. For example, our interviews occurred in a highly specific context that is framed by Australia's history of colonisation and the mistrust that Aboriginal Australians have for non-Aboriginal social workers (Harms et al., 2011). Much of the Aboriginal Australian history of this country continues to be hidden and the experiences of Aboriginal Australians, therefore, in many instances remain invisible. This suggests that understanding and amplifying the experiences of those interviewed is of paramount importance and can inform effective social work practice. This approach entails the creation of "I poems" (Gilligan, 1982) by the researcher, by putting together each sentence from a paragraph where the interviewee started a statement with "I". "I poems" (Gilligan, 1982) amplify the voices of participants by conveying meaning clearly and evocatively and are used along with direct quotations in this article to illustrate themes.

Themes were refined through an iterative process. Collectively, the authors discussed, assessed, and refined each theme for conceptual depth (Nelson, 2017). We checked that each theme was comprehensively supported in the data, that the nuance of differing responses was represented within each theme, and that themes identified were congruent with concepts expressed in previous literature.

Ethics Approval

This study conforms to internationally accepted and professional ethical guidelines. The Research Ethics Committee of La Trobe University granted ethical approval for this study. All participants received detailed written information about the study, were provided with several opportunities to ask questions, and provided written consent prior to participation.

Results

Challenges for Non-Aboriginal Social Workers

We start by outlining the negative experiences of social workers recounted by the Aboriginal people we interviewed. Participants suggested that non-Aboriginal social workers have an insufficient understanding of the contemporary impacts of colonisation and historical child removal and that some can be racist. Participants also identified non-Aboriginal social workers as paying insufficient attention to the negative impacts of power in practice.

Limited Understanding of the Contemporary Impacts of Colonisation

While colonisation continues to significantly impact the lives of Aboriginal Australians, interviewees suggested that non-Aboriginal social workers do not always make the connections between invasion and colonisation and how the ensuing policies and practices have contributed to the current disadvantage of Aboriginal Australians. However, rather than suggesting that non-Aboriginal social workers simply have no knowledge of colonisation, interviewees made the more subtle point that social workers lack a real understanding and appreciation of the ongoing and pervasive influence of colonisation, not only on individual Aboriginal Australians themselves but for all families and communities. Marg emphasised how important it is for non-Aboriginal social workers to recognise the breadth of the influence of colonisation, "to really understand the past, it's not just one person, it's a whole family and community".

Aboriginal participants like Alannah make very clear connections between the events of the past and the contemporary struggles of Aboriginal Australians when she said,

> You can see that they [non-Aboriginal social workers] are not really understanding why this is still such an issue and why our people are still going through things like abusing drugs and alcohol dependency and stuff. You know they [non-Aboriginal social workers] don't get it and they're not really understanding.

Marg observed relatedly that non-Aboriginal social workers tend to individualise problems, blame, make judgements, and take actions in relation to Aboriginal Australians that are not helpful and moreover may be harmful. Marg described having "a couple of social workers and they've had no idea … it hurts and then you lose that trust". Donna suggested that if an Aboriginal person feels that the social worker does not understand the impacts of the past, they will hold back, not engage with the non-Aboriginal social worker and decide, as Donna said in her interview, "well, that's it for you". When this happens, an opportunity for an Aboriginal Australian to receive support and access to the resources that they are entitled to, is lost. Furthermore, Alannah argues that it is impossible for non-Aboriginal social workers to fully appreciate the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal Australians without understanding the historical context. Those interviewed perceived that some social workers, therefore, lack understanding that contemporary issues for Aboriginal people, such as alcohol and drug use, have historical causes. Hence, they tend to unfairly attribute blame to Aboriginal individuals.

Understanding of Child Removal

The relationship between social work and Aboriginal Australians is powerfully framed by the profession's involvement in the historical removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities. Concerningly for the profession, interviewees categorically associated the profession with child removal: historical and contemporary. Marg, for example, said, "after I realised that I was Stolen … I looked differently at social workers" pointing to the suspicion felt by many of those interviewed. She concluded, "we [Aboriginal Australians] don't trust you because you're a social worker". In this "I poem" Marg talks about being treated with suspicion and mistrust, as she connects this experience with historical events.

I saw the mistrust
I think it's the way that they acted

I'm not quite sure
I think [that's] just how the history has been

It is well documented that the intergenerational impacts of child removal, poor socioeconomic conditions, and a lack of understanding of cultural child-rearing practices combine to produce the conditions for excessive child protection involvement in Aboriginal families (AIHW, 2020). Interviewees suggested that these underlying reasons for involvement with child protection need to be better understood by non-Aboriginal social workers to avoid blaming Aboriginal Australians for the challenges that they experience. Alannah stated that some non-Aboriginal social workers have "a lack of understanding and knowledge … about Stolen Gens and what happened", mirroring their poor understanding of colonisation.

One widespread misconception about The Stolen Generations identified by participants in our study is that it is a phenomenon of the past. Reflected in the "I poem" below, interviewees felt that by relegating The Stolen Generations to history, non-Aboriginal social workers cannot fully appreciate and are, therefore, reluctant to explore what this might mean for the Aboriginal Australians with whom they work now.

I think everybody seems to think that The Stolen Generations was in the past
I think it's very different to that
I think people need to understand this

Described by interviewees in this study were profound feelings of shame, loneliness, fear, lack of safety, and an immobilising lack of confidence associated with being removed from family and community. Donna said that as a member of The Stolen Generations herself, she had "grown up having no real place in society and not having that confidence … was a hard thing" for her and others who were removed from their families as children. Marg reported that being removed from family leaves one with an enduring feeling of being inferior. Worryingly, Marg and others reported being treated by some non-Aboriginal social workers as though this were the case. This is illustrated in the following quotation: "At times I still have that feeling where a non-Indigenous social worker will look at you with those knowing eyes … it's superiority".

Given the profession's association with child removal, it is not surprising that participants like Alannah noted "Aboriginal Australians are still really afraid of social workers". Understandably, fear of child removal was reported by many participants as a reason for Aboriginal Australians being reluctant to engage with non-Aboriginal social workers. In the following "I poem", Alannah refers to this fear.

I know people that were removed and were so scared that their children were going to be removed
I know my mum's sister; her house is never dirty because of the fear of her children being taken away
I hope that people going into social work have the understanding
I just think though that they don't know nearly enough
I think it shouldn't be like that
I think that they don't really know what these things mean

Those affected by removal are managing enormous pain. Sadly, interviewees like Cathy felt that many non-Aboriginal social workers do not have a clear enough understanding of the devastating effects of having been removed and in her words "are not really

understanding why this is still an issue". Concerningly, Donna had observed a prevailing and very offensive attitude among non-Aboriginal social workers that members of The Stolen Generations and their families "need to get over it". Participants perceived that some non-Aboriginal social workers tend to minimise the loss, sadness, and heartbreak associated with child removal, resulting in missed opportunities to empathise and contribute to healing.

Enduring Racist Attitudes

Like Kay, other interviewees perceive that social workers are not immune to racist attitudes about Aboriginal service users. In the quotation below, Kay reflected on the impact of negative attitudes on non-Aboriginal social workers and their treatment of Aboriginal Australians.

> I think it's the stereotypes … like they [non-Aboriginal social workers] expect you to have a drug problem or a drink problem or you're not a hundred percent as a parent … social workers just seem to be really bad against Aboriginal Australians because of the stereotypes.

Our interviews are replete with references to the prejudice that Aboriginal Australians have been subjected to, making it clear that racism, prejudice, and stereotyping persist. Donna suggested that "with a white social worker, you've already kind of been judged before you even tell anything". Jill noted "you know that attitude … they [non-Aboriginal social workers] think that all [of] us Blackfellas are the same". Jill identified that stereotyping leads to a lack of cultural safety which is discussed below. She pointed to the problem of non-Aboriginal social workers assuming that things would be the same for different families, communities, states, or mobs. These statements are examples of one kind of racism discussed above, stereotyping, that Aboriginal Australians can experience from non-Aboriginal social workers.

In several interviews, the prejudice experienced by light-skinned Aboriginal Australians was raised. Those who were lighter-skinned reported being judged or disbelieved by non-Aboriginal social workers who were sceptical of their Aboriginality. Sadie described how "heartbreaking" it was for her when a non-Aboriginal social worker said to her "you can't be Aboriginal if you're white". As Sadie suggested, these kinds of statements invalidate and delegitimise the identity of light-skinned Aboriginal Australians.

Developing culturally safe practice is intrinsic to engaging in antiracist social work with Aboriginal Australians. However, Aboriginal participants in our study such as Barb, were clear that some non-Aboriginal social workers lacked sufficient understanding of Aboriginal culture and that this can be a barrier to engagement. Barb expresses her concern in the "I poem" below.

I had heaps of social workers.
I remember one lady she didn't have a clue.
I don't see very much cultural understanding.
I think they don't understand.
I don't think it's changed very much at all.

Parenting practices have been identified as one element of Aboriginal Australians' lives that are not always well understood by non-Aboriginal social workers. In her interview,

Alannah talked about her family's experiences with non-Aboriginal social workers and explained that their "lack of understanding" of her "mum's way of parenting" left her feeling afraid that child protection workers would remove her and her brothers from her mother's care. Where non-Aboriginal social workers misunderstand Aboriginal parenting practices, they may overlook important elements of care and protection provided.

Ignoring Power

Aboriginal Australians are highly attuned to the power that non-Aboriginal social workers can wield, perhaps more so than the social workers themselves. In the following "I poem" Barb highlights the terrible injustices that occur when power is wielded unfairly.

> I don't know why, the Government just decided to buy their house,
> I don't know why, they said, because you don't have a house now, you can't look after your kids, so we'll take them off you,
> I think they were setting them up to fail

As noted by Kay, when she said, "without power, people just can't get ahead in life", one element of effective practice, related to promoting self-determination, is to work in a way that gives Aboriginal Australians a greater sense of agency and more control over their lives. It was apparent in her interview that Kay understood social workers' imperative to empower those with whom they work. However, she felt that this is not always well understood, adhered to, or achieved by non-Aboriginal social workers.

Alannah, also attuned to the effects of power, emphasised that "anyone in … high authority who can have a say over your family like social workers, it's quite daunting … it's scary". She noted how hard it is for Aboriginal Australians to feel secure because as she observed, "you know you're doing a good job and then someone comes in and tells you that you're not". When this occurs in a statutory context, the consequences for Aboriginal families can be devastating. Like others, Alannah highlighted the need for non-Aboriginal social workers to understand the dynamics of power and how to exercise power in empowering ways.

Conversely, Kerry noticed that non-Aboriginal social workers could lack thought and fail to collaborate with the Aboriginal families they work with. She observed that "they can be a bit pushy … they will just share an opinion of how that family should operate" which is very disempowering for Aboriginal families.

Solutions Identified by Aboriginal Australians

We turn now to identify strategies and approaches that our research participants argued were necessary to improve non-Aboriginal social work practice. We begin with the need for non-Aboriginal social workers to review and reconstruct their relationships with Aboriginal Australians. Identifying, and rejecting, racism and being open to learning from Aboriginal Australians are necessary changes for social work practice with Aboriginal Australians to be improved.

Reconstructing Relationships—Being Trustworthy, Honest, and Authentic

As Kay confirmed in her interview, "there has to be trust" pointing to the need for social workers to focus on being trustworthy as a priority and to address what Craig identified

as an "enduring mistrust of any kind of authority", including that of non-Aboriginal social workers. However, Craig also acknowledged that "the ability to develop trust is really context dependent", highlighting that the non-Aboriginal social workers in child protection and other statutory contexts cannot always expect to gain the trust of the Aboriginal Australians with whom they work.

Kay's description of social workers she trusts were those who "reach out when other people would've given up, [provide] encouragement and are not pushy". Marg highlighted how important it is for social workers to provide unequivocal support to those with whom they work when she said, "we just want someone to … say 'okay, I support you 100%, I'm here for you'". Kay reminded non-Aboriginal social workers that "it's really, really hard to put your hand out for help, so don't shut the door too quickly", encouraging understanding and persistence if Aboriginal Australians are reluctant to engage. This was the case for Kay who said about herself, "I'm not one to put my hand up", reinforcing the need for non-Aboriginal social workers to recognise how hard it can be for Aboriginal Australians to seek help and support, particularly from non-Aboriginal social workers, and to, therefore, be proactive in their approach.

As a first step, Marg emphasised that to contribute to healing, non-Aboriginal social workers must be honest with the Aboriginal Australians about what they can do and "try not to promise things unless there is a high chance you [non-Aboriginal social workers] can deliver". Marg reminded non-Aboriginal social workers that this is so important because "Aboriginal people have been promised so much and then had it ripped away". Reminders like this are crucial for non-Aboriginal social workers to pay attention to if they are to build trust with Aboriginal Australians.

When reflecting on her relationships with non-Aboriginal social workers, Donna suggested the "need to get to know them (Aboriginal Australians) and sit down and have a yarn" and "just being a friend" was most important. Adopting a caring and compassionate approach also was identified by Kay who described the essence of social work as "kind of holding someone's hand and helping them … walking with them … and then at that certain stage you let go, you let them cross the road". Jill was looking for someone who could "just come in as yourself, be you", highlighting the importance of non-Aboriginal social workers being genuine and authentic. As mentioned earlier, rather than treating Aboriginal Australians with suspicion, Jill said, "you [non-Aboriginal social workers] stick up for them, look after them, watch out for them" providing unequivocal support because Jill thought "that's what they need from social workers; they need … the social workers to be on their side". Participants like Jill challenged conventional notions of professionalism, stating that they preferred a more informal, equal, and human relationship. The kind of relationship described in these interviews suggests the need to review the way that the profession currently conceptualises relationships with Aboriginal Australians.

Addressing Racism

According to those interviewed, too often non-Aboriginal social workers are influenced by the pervasive negative stereotypes about Aboriginal Australians, thus potentially contributing to the racism that Aboriginal Australians experience. When Marg said, "it's all about stereotypes, we're not bad at all", she noted the importance of non-Aboriginal social workers rejecting these stereotypes if they are to engage effectively with those

they work with. In fact, Kay suggested that non-Aboriginal social workers needed to "come in … and approach [Aboriginal Australians] each time fresh" rather than making assumptions and acting in accordance with preconceived ideas. This reinforces the importance of engaging in critically reflective practice to interrogate and reject negative and racist ideas about Aboriginal Australians (Fejo-King, 2011). In addition, challenging negative stereotypes about Aboriginal Australians was identified by participants like Kay as also being the role of social work education providers "to educate on that … to change their (non-Aboriginal social work student's) way of thinking".

Interviewees suggested that non-Aboriginal social workers need to really try to understand what has happened to Aboriginal Australians. Marg emphasised how important this is when she said, "listen, that's all they (non-Aboriginal social workers) can do". Donna emphasised the value of listening when she suggested that non-Aboriginal social workers should "listen to the stories first … think what has this one been through … really think about being in our shoes". In this quotation, Donna is hopeful that by listening, non-Aboriginal social workers may be more able to empathise and feel compassion for those with whom they work. Donna stressed that "it's about connecting with what someone has actually been through", emphasising that true listening can lead to empathy. Ann said that when non-Aboriginal social workers are empathic and compassionate, they (non-Aboriginal social workers) can "make you feel like you're supported and protected … and this makes you feel loved and supported". This indicates the profoundly positive impact of a compassionate and empathic non-Aboriginal social worker.

Openness to Learning from Aboriginal Australians

As well as educators preparing students, Kerry emphasised that developing knowledge for practice requires openness to "learning on the job" from Aboriginal Australians. Kerry advised, "I'd rather them ask … and get the right answer the first time … than go off and read that article that might not be relevant".

The importance of strong relationships between non-Aboriginal social workers and their Aboriginal colleagues is apparent throughout these interviews. Recognising the expertise of Aboriginal workers, the potential for learning, being able to respectfully ask questions, and, as Kerry suggested, "talking a lot to Aboriginal staff" rather than seeking out "experts" from elsewhere were recognised as behaviours that contributed to strong working relationships and ultimately to learning. As noted by Ann, being a good coworker is so important because Aboriginal colleagues pave the way for non-Aboriginal social workers to be trusted by Aboriginal service users and their communities. In her interview Ann advised non-Aboriginal social workers to "make sure you're a good colleague to your Aboriginal colleagues because they're the ones who are going to get you that trust … get you into the Community and trusted by the community".

The importance of non-Aboriginal social workers recognising the gaps in their knowledge and taking responsibility for their own learning was identified.

Discussion

These interviews provide insight into how Aboriginal Australians who participated in this research perceive non-Aboriginal social workers. Aboriginal participants noted

that too many non-Aboriginal social workers have an insufficient understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal experiences. Inadequate understanding of the contemporary impacts of colonisation, particularly the intergenerational impacts of child removal were highlighted. The profession's association with historical and contemporary child removal and the prominence of social workers in child protection, health, and justice, where Aboriginal Australians are overserviced promotes an enduring mistrust of non-Aboriginal social workers (Bennett & Green, 2019; Harms et al., 2011). Furthermore, interviewees perceived that some social workers continue to adhere to the misconception about the Stolen Generations as identified in the literature (Bennett & Green, 2019), that it is a phenomenon of the past.

Concerningly, negative experiences with, and racist attitudes from, non-Aboriginal social workers were reported by interviewees. A lack of culturally safe practice, such as an insufficient understanding of parenting practices, can be particularly harmful in a statutory context such as child protection (Bennett & Green, 2019). Interviewees perceived that non-Aboriginal social workers do not always understand well enough the need to support self-determination. Interviewees noted that social workers have considerable professional power and a corresponding responsibility to minimise power imbalances so as not to be experienced as oppressive. These interviews suggested that this may not always be successfully achieved by all non-Aboriginal social workers. As a result of their experiences with non-Aboriginal social workers, some Aboriginal Australians are reluctant to engage with non-Aboriginal social workers for fear of poor treatment or child removal.

At the same time, participants identified that in their relationships with non-Aboriginal social workers there exists potential for healing. Fortunately for social workers, Aboriginal Australians who participated in this research, remain hopeful that social workers who belong to a profession that claims a commitment to social justice and human rights can engage with them with compassion and understanding. As reported previously (Harms et al., 2011), and recognised by those interviewed in our study, being trustworthy is one of the most significant elements of engagement and relationship building with Aboriginal Australians.

Interviewees suggested that for change to occur, non-Aboriginal social workers must be well prepared by social work education providers for working with Aboriginal Australians and this includes understanding the importance of engagement in critical reflection with a focus on identifying, interrogating, and rejecting negative and racist ideas about Aboriginal Australians (Holl, 2021). In addition, participants in our study highlighted the importance of non-Aboriginal social workers recognising the potential for learning in their relationships with Aboriginal colleagues.

Our study suggests that non-Aboriginal social workers need to practice in an antiracist culturally safe way to navigate the complexities of working with Aboriginal Australians. Ongoing critical reflection, education, and dialogue to dismantle stereotypes, biases, and power imbalances have been recognised as components of a culturally safe approach (Bennett et al., 2011). In addition, social workers must advocate for culturally responsive policies and practices that prioritise the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal Australians (Bennett & Green, 2019). Supporting self-determination by recognising that Aboriginal Australians are experts in their own lives and possess valuable knowledge, resources, and resilience is a further requirement for effective practice (Bennett & Green, 2019).

As others have done in Australia and internationally, (Choate, 2019) the authors advocate for urgent action to prepare social work students better to engage in effective practice with Aboriginal Australians. Social work education providers and the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) are well positioned to drive and support Indigenous-led change.

Limitations

This study has presented the perceptions of a small number of Aboriginal Australians. It is, therefore, likely that the depth and breadth of experiences of broader groups from which interviewees are drawn are underrepresented. However, participants' contribution to understanding how non-Aboriginal social workers are perceived by Aboriginal Australians are valuable and significant for the profession and individual social workers who want to engage effectively with Aboriginal Australians.

Conclusion

According to the Aboriginal Australians who were interviewed for this study, social workers must have an understanding and an appreciation of the ongoing impacts of invasion, colonisation, and the intergenerational impacts of child removal if they are to work effectively with them. Child protection, other statutory settings, and hospitals are sites of harm, where racism is reported to be a common experience for Aboriginal Australians. However, combatting racism is an issue for all social workers, the profession, and the human service organisations in which they work. Embedding Indigenous history and knowledge in social work curricula, teaching social work students how to engage differently with Aboriginal Australians, and learning what actions and practices help Aboriginal people feel trust in social workers are recommended for social work education providers to better prepare social workers to support Aboriginal self-determination.

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the Aboriginal Australians who participated in this study and generously shared their experiences of non-Aboriginal social workers.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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