Uncovering reproductions of colonization within occupational therapy practice: Exploring the utility of institutional ethnography to improve occupational therapy practice in Indigenous communities in Canada

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Objective and approach

Through the case of practice in Inuit communities in Nunavut, Canada, I will explore how institutional ethnography (IE) can be used to uncover reproductions of colonization within occupational therapy practice.

My exploration is supported by:
- Critical reflexivity relating to personal and professional experiences
- Informal exchanges with Inuit and non-Inuit
- A preliminary examination of texts impacting practice in Nunavut
What is colonization?

• Process that employs modes of control to manage a population and/or expropriate land, resources and people (Tuck & Yang, 2012)

• Purpose is to secure wealth and/or privilege and power for colonizers (Tuck & Yank, 2012)

• Often enacted through policies and laws

• Key determinant of health for Indigenous Peoples (Allan & Smylie, 2015)

• Dominance of Western thought in OT has been linked to intellectual colonialism (Hammell, 2015)
Colonisation in Canada

• Indian Act of 1876
• Residential school system
• Forced relocation and expropriation of lands
• Resource access tied to compliance with government directives
• Over-representation of children in state foster care
• Slaughter of sled dogs
What is institutional ethnography?

- “a form of critical social inquiry” (Bisaillon, 2012, p. 614)

- Seeks to uncover how texts shape local activities and why things happen the way they do

- Governing texts produce ruling relations
  - “creates the conditions of individual experience” (McCoy, 2006, p. 109).
Why institutional ethnography?

• IE can be used to explain how ruling relations originating in Western worldviews impact Indigenous lives (Wilson and Pence, 2006)

• Critical perspectives can expose colonialism (Simpson, 2011)

• Pairing critical and Indigenous perspectives in research can support positive Indigenous health outcomes (Nowgesic, 2013)

• IE can help to show how systems subvert core aims of a profession (Corman & Melon, 2014).
What texts govern OT practice?

• Occupational therapy models, texts, educational curriculums
• Regulatory body documents
• Legislation
• Best practice guidelines
• Evidence-based practice literature
• Standardized assessments
• Institutional policies
• Documentation forms
Textually mediated ruling relations in Nunavut

1. Cognitive assessment required for dementia medication funding
2. Need for complete assessment before loaning a wheelchair
3. Not giving or receiving gifts from clients
4. Prioritization tools
5. Functional Independence Measure completion linked to service funding
6. Standardized developmental assessment
Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit values:

• Diverse knowledges and knowledge sources, including:
  • Experiential
  • Empirical
  • Spiritual

• Knowledge is dynamic, adaptable, evolves to solve problems

• Knowledge production is relational, incorporating experience and innovation

• No universal truths, knowledge is context-dependent

• Humility

• Relationships, respect

• Holism
Ruling relations in this context may be perceived as:

- Gatekeeping
- Value-imposing
- Threatening (e.g., social services)
- Intrusive
- Exercise of power
- Judgemental
- Lacking opportunities for choice
- Getting in the way of being human

Consider words associated with colonization:

Control, power/privilege, policies
Practice implications

• Textually mediated ruling relations can override:
  • Client-centred practice values
  • Informed consent
  • Opportunities for:
    • cultural safety
    • trauma-informed practice
    • anti-oppressive practice
    • health equity and justice
What to do?

- Aspire to allyship
- Practice critical reflexivity
- Discuss, acknowledge, face the discomfort
- Value diverse epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies
- Build relationships
- Look for opportunities to equalize the therapist/client power dynamic
- Reconciliation/Saimaqatigiingniq
Conclusions

• Governing texts can encourage actions that reproduce colonial forces, deny Indigenous self-determination and contradict core occupational therapy professional values.

• Institutional ethnography can support the identification of colonizing forces within occupational therapy practices.
  • From here we are better positioned to engage in reconciliation and meaningful practice change
Questions?

Quyanimmik! Thank you!

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