



Autism Through Indigenous Lens



2025

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Autism Through Indigenous Lens

1. Colonial History and Present Colonial Influence

The medical model of autism often emphasizes deficits and impairments, leading to the stigmatization of autistic individuals. Additionally, there is a scarcity of academic literature that explores the lived experiences of autism within First Nations communities. The colonial legacy within Canada has significantly influenced the understanding and acceptance of autism in First Nations communities. Historical trauma, cultural disconnection, and systemic disparities have resulted in a shortage of resources and support for autistic individuals and their families. These challenges are further exacerbated by stigma and misconceptions about autism, often leading to social isolation and discrimination.

Compared to the mainstream population, Indigenous communities experience substantially higher rates of child mortality, maternal morbidity, infectious diseases, shorter life expectancies, malnutrition, substance abuse, chronic lifestyle-related diseases, accidents, violence, and suicide (Barnabe, 2021; Gracey & King, 2009; Smylie & Anderson, 2006; Wilson & Young, 2008). The repercussions of colonial policies have been profound and persistent. For example, the Indian Act of 1876 prohibited cultural practices, including ceremonies, and instituted the residential school system. The impacts of these policies are still evident in First Nations communities across Canada today (Wilk et al., 2017). Additionally, the Indian Act grants the federal health minister significant authority over “mentally incompetent Indians” (Bartlett, 1977), a term that could be extended to include Autistic Indigenous individuals today. The implications of such language and the underlying assumptions raise serious concerns regarding imposed power and its potential consequences. Moreover, First Nation reserves operate under the Indian Act and fall under federal jurisdiction, while disability services, including those for autism, are managed at the provincial level. This division often results in both levels of government deferring responsibility to one another, leaving reserves without necessary services.

2. A Way of Knowing

Definitions of Autism

The two community reports offered valuable insights into the experiences of autism within their respective communities. For instance, the Cowessess First Nation community report (2021) presented a Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) cultural perspective on autism. While the report has not undergone peer review, it provides significant insights into an Indigenous—specifically Nehiyaw—understanding of autism.

The report details several culturally informed definitions of autism, including:

- **ka-kamawaci-iyinisit** (possessing a unique quiet spiritual intelligence).
- **pihtos-mânitonihk-iyinisit** (having a different way of thinking within one's own spiritual intelligence).
- **ê-mihkosit pihtos mânitonicihkan** (experiencing a different approach to spiritual thinking).
- **ê-mihkosit pihtos ê-si-waskawiht** (being characterized by a distinct way of moving or behaving).

Foremost Expert in the Field

Grant Bruno is a leading expert in Indigenous perspectives on autism, particularly within First Nations communities in Canada. He is a Faculty Member in medical sciences at the University of Alberta and a registered member of nipsihkipahk (Samson Cree Nation) in Maskwacis, Alberta. Grant's expertise is deeply rooted in his personal experiences as a parent of an autistic child, which prompted him to explore the significant gaps in the literature regarding autism and Indigenous communities. He has identified only a limited number of high-quality studies on the subject, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive research.

In his work, Grant contrasts the medical model of disability, which often frames autism as a deficit, with Indigenous views that regard autistic individuals as sacred and valuable members of the community. He employs an Indigenous-led approach to research, prioritizing relationships and collaboration with Indigenous families to ensure that their voices and needs are central to his studies. Grant has interviewed parents from Maskwacis and other reserves, uncovering their unique challenges due to jurisdictional issues and lack of access to services. His commitment to his community extends beyond research; he has initiated support groups and created inclusive spaces, such as a sensory teepee for children. Through his efforts, Grant aims to advocate for better access to clinical services within First Nations communities and to promote a more respectful understanding of autism that aligns with Indigenous values and teachings.

Grant's documentary, [The Gift of Being Different](#), provides an intimate exploration of his journey

as a parent navigating the world of autism within the context of his Indigenous community. The film highlights the unique perspectives and cultural understandings that shape how autism is viewed in the Samson Cree Nation. Through candid storytelling and personal anecdotes, Grant illustrates the challenges his family faced when accessing necessary services and the resilience and strength within his community. The documentary emphasizes the belief that autism is a gift, showcasing the beauty of diversity and the importance of nurturing connections. By sharing his experiences and those of other families, Grant aims to foster greater awareness and understanding of autism in Indigenous contexts, encouraging a shift away from deficit-based narratives toward a celebration of the unique contributions that autistic individuals make to their families and communities.

Reading Grant's work is essential for understanding the complex interplay between autism and Indigenous ways of knowing, especially in First Nations communities. His research sheds light on the often-overlooked experiences of autistic individuals and their families, highlighting the significant gaps in existing literature and the urgent need for culturally relevant support and services. By engaging with Grant's insights, we gain a deeper appreciation for the importance of viewing autism through an Indigenous lens, which recognizes the inherent value and strengths of autistic individuals. His commitment to advocating for equitable access to resources and services not only amplifies the voices of marginalized communities but also challenges dominant narratives that frame autism as a deficit.

3. Distinct Best Practices for Autism Through an Indigenous Lens

Understanding and supporting autistic individuals requires prioritizing the interconnectedness of family, community, and cultural context. When implementing best practices for autism, particularly in Indigenous communities, several vital strategies emerge, grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and the principles of family and community engagement.

Family-Centred Care:

Central to adequate autism support is the recognition of families as integral to the decision-making process. Practitioners should prioritize families' insights and needs, creating a collaborative environment that respects their experiences and cultural practices. This includes providing training and resources tailored for all family members (beyond a Western understanding of the nuclear family), and empowering them to support their loved ones effectively. Incorporating traditional knowledge and values, such as storytelling and cultural rituals (where appropriate and not without consultation first), can enhance family engagement and strengthen their role in supporting the autistic individual's journey.

Community Engagement

Building strong relationships with community leaders and members is essential for fostering a supportive environment for autistic individuals. Practitioners should actively engage with the community through meetings, culturally relevant education sessions, and collaborative planning efforts honouring Indigenous traditions and perspectives. This engagement may include inviting elders to share their wisdom, utilizing community gatherings to disseminate information, and incorporating local customs and practices into support strategies. Such efforts promote a sense of belonging and acceptance for autistic individuals.

Practitioners must prioritize relationship-building within the community. These connections should be nurtured over time, as they can last a lifetime. Unlike the often transactional nature of client relationships, Indigenous cultures emphasize deep, meaningful connections that transcend mere service delivery. By investing in genuine relationships, practitioners can create a foundation of trust and collaboration that significantly enhances the well-being of autistic individuals and their families.

Prioritizing Remote Reserves

Practitioners must recognize the unique challenges remote reserves face, particularly regarding geographical barriers to access and limited resources. These challenges can significantly hinder the delivery of effective services for autistic individuals and their families. To address these issues, it is essential to develop comprehensive strategies that enhance accessibility, continuity of care, and cultural relevance.

Implementing Telehealth Services

Telehealth offers a valuable solution for overcoming geographical barriers. By utilizing digital platforms, practitioners can provide remote consultations, assessments, and follow-up care to individuals who may otherwise struggle to access services.

Solutions:

- **Training and Support:** Provide training for practitioners and community members on how to use telehealth technologies effectively. This may include workshops on setting up virtual appointments and using communication tools.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** Collaborate with local governments or organizations to improve internet connectivity in remote areas, ensuring families have the resources necessary to participate in telehealth services.

Establishing Mobile Clinics

Mobile clinics can bridge the gap in healthcare access by bringing services directly to remote communities. These clinics can provide various services, from assessments to therapeutic interventions, ensuring that care is available to those who may have difficulty traveling to traditional healthcare facilities.

Solutions:

- **Partnerships:** Collaborate with local health authorities, non-profit organizations, or universities to fund and operate mobile clinics. This can help secure necessary resources and expertise.
- **Cultural Relevance:** Ensure that the services offered through mobile clinics are culturally relevant and tailored to the community's needs. This might involve hiring local practitioners or integrating traditional healing practices into service offerings.

Regular Practitioner Visits

Regular practitioner visits can provide consistent and reliable care, fostering stronger relationships between healthcare providers and community members. These visits help build trust and ensure that families feel supported in their needs.

Solutions:

- **Scheduling Rotations:** Create a rotating schedule for practitioners to visit remote reserves regularly, allowing families to anticipate and plan their appointments. This consistency can significantly enhance the continuity of care.
- **Community Feedback:** Solicit input from community members about their needs and preferences for these visits, ensuring that services are aligned with local priorities and culturally appropriate practices.

Leveraging Local Resources and Knowledge

Practitioners should actively seek to connect with local resources, such as traditional healers and community health workers, to enhance service delivery and ensure culturally appropriate care.

Solutions:

- **Collaboration with Traditional Healers:** Establish partnerships with traditional healers to incorporate Indigenous healing practices into the care plan for autistic individuals. This collaboration can create a more holistic approach that respects and values the community's cultural heritage.
- **Training Community Health Workers:** Invest in training local community health workers to support autistic individuals and their families. These workers can serve as liaisons between practitioners and the community, helping to navigate services and resources effectively.

Holistic Approach

A holistic approach that considers the individual's physical, emotional, and social well-being within the context of their community is vital. Practitioners should recognize the interconnectedness of all aspects of life, as emphasized in Indigenous ways of knowing. This means incorporating traditional healing practices, land-based therapies, and cultural activities that promote well-being. By fostering a connection to land, culture, and community, practitioners can enhance the overall quality of life for autistic individuals and their families, reinforcing the importance of a balanced, interconnected existence.

Capacity Building

Investing in the training and development of local community members is essential for building sustainable support systems. Practitioners can reduce reliance on external services by empowering community members with the skills and knowledge necessary to provide ongoing care and support. This capacity-building approach should include mentoring programs, where experienced community members can share their knowledge with others and incorporate traditional knowledge and practices into training curricula. This empowers communities to provide culturally relevant support honouring their unique heritage and values.

Incorporation of Evidence-Informed Practices

As in the best practices outlined, recommended supports and services must reflect careful consideration of the best available research evidence. Integrating clinical expertise with the lived experiences of those diagnosed with autism and their families ensures that services are relevant and practical. It is important to be reflective about the colonial knowledges inherent in many of our "Evidence-Informed Practices." Practitioners should seek to draw from many ways of knowing and assessment by also drawing upon Indigenous knowledge systems, prioritizing collective wisdom, observation of nature, and the importance of community context.

Continuous Improvement and Training

The commitment to ongoing training and fidelity in service delivery is paramount. All practitioners involved in caring for autistic individuals should be well-trained in culturally relevant practices, ensuring that services are delivered competently and consistently. This includes incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing, such as cyclical learning processes and community feedback, to inform continuous improvement efforts. Practitioners should seek guidance from Indigenous knowledge keepers and community members, attend ceremonies and make space to reflect on their biases, ensuring that the evolution of services aligns with cultural values and community needs.

4. List of Services for Indigenous Autistic People and Their Family

Jordan's Principle

Jordan's Principle plays a crucial role in supporting autistic Indigenous individuals by ensuring they receive timely and equitable access to essential services tailored to their unique needs. This child-first policy effectively removes bureaucratic barriers and jurisdictional disputes, enabling autistic children and their families to access vital resources, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, and educational support, without delay. However, despite its intention to provide "timely funding," recent reports indicate that this objective has not been consistently met, highlighting ongoing challenges in implementing the principle.

Alberta's Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD)

Alberta's Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) program is designed to assist families with children who have disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum, by providing access to essential resources and services. The program aims to enhance the quality of life for these children and their families by offering support tailored to their needs. However, while FSCD is intended to facilitate access to vital services, many families face challenges navigating the application process and securing the necessary funding. These barriers can hinder timely access to crucial supports, which are essential for the well-being and development of children with disabilities.

The Alberta First Nations Health Consortium (AFNHC)

The Alberta First Nations Health Consortium (AFNHC) is dedicated to improving health outcomes for Indigenous communities across Alberta by coordinating and delivering health services that are culturally relevant and accessible. The consortium focuses on a holistic approach to health that considers individuals' physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. By partnering with First Nations communities, AFNHC aims to empower Indigenous peoples to take charge of their health care and address their unique challenges. However, despite its mission to enhance health services, many First Nations still need help accessing care, including limited resources and ongoing systemic inequities, which can impede the effective delivery of essential health support.

It is important to note that specific supports for Autistic Indigenous individuals and their families are often limited due to a combination of systemic barriers and resource constraints. Many First Nations communities face significant challenges in accessing essential services such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, and educational support, primarily because these services may not be readily available on reserves. Families often have to travel long distances to access necessary assessments and treatments, leading to delays that can hinder early intervention.

Additionally, funding for these services is frequently insufficient, and bureaucratic hurdles can complicate the application processes for support programs. As a result, Autistic Indigenous individuals may not receive the tailored, culturally appropriate services they require, exacerbating the disparities in health and educational outcomes within these communities.

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