JHR CRITICAL RESEARCH AND PERSPECTIVES

Reconciliation and OT in Canada: Experiences and Perspectives From Practitioners

By Tara Pride, PhD, Justin Turner, PhD, Monique Lizon, MPH, and Janna MacLachlan, PhD

Abstract

Introduction. The occupational therapy (OT) profession in recent years has been grappling with the ongoing impacts of colonialism and its implications for education and clinical practice. This includes challenging the centering of Western ideologies and science, and continuing reproduction of Western dominance in rehabilitation. Highlighting colonial harms such as land displacement and Residential Schools, we aim to connect historical and ongoing colonial practices to global patterns of oppression. Despite ongoing challenges, the importance of emphasizing Indigenous resilience and cultural reclamation is vital to illuminating the importance of Indigenous knowledges and Peoples to the profession.

Objectives: This manuscript features personal narratives from Indigenous and non-Indigenous occupational therapists in Canada, sharing our experiences and perspectives on reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples and settler society. We explore what reconciliation means specifically for the field of OT, highlighting the impacts of colonization on Indigenous individuals and communities. Through the sharing of our own stories, we provide learnings on how occupational therapists can, and must, contribute to reconciliation efforts, including the need for systemic changes, embracing Indigenous knowledges, and fostering respectful relationships.

Conclusion: The work underscores the importance of understanding historical and ongoing colonialism to promote healing and uphold Indigenous rights within the profession. Although there is importance in enacting change at the individual level, change must also occur at broader systemic and institutional levels to meaningfully and sustainably move toward reconciliation and decolonization. This work is required not only in the Canadian context but other countries with similar colonial histories.

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Notes to Readers:

- The authors use the term 'Indigenous' throughout this manuscript and wish to acknowledge the limitations and implications of collapsing diverse Indigenous Nations and Peoples under one umbrella term. Indigenous Peoples in Canada have had many shared experiences and also many that are specific to territory and People. We speak about specific Peoples wherever possible.

- We also acknowledge the complexity and politics surrounding use of the term 'settler'. In our understanding, this term is not only a label that directly connects identity to colonialism, but also requires a commitment to resist the status quo, which we may not always meaningfully enact.[1]

- In terms of our positionalities as authors of this article, we are a woman with mixed Mi'kmaw and settler ancestry, a man with mixed Métis and settler ancestry, and two white women of settler descent.

Introduction

In this manuscript, we employ storytelling to share our experiences and learnings about the status of reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples and settler society in the territory of Turtle Island now known as Canada (readers interested in learning more about the origins, history, and usage of the term "Turtle Island" can visit: Turtle Island | The Canadian Encyclopedia. As two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous occupational therapists, we focus specifically on what we've learned reconciliation means for occupational therapy (OT). Although we cannot claim to represent the perspectives and experiences of all Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island, we are humbled and grateful to share our stories, and we hope the reader can glean relevant learnings from our narratives. For this opportunity, we say thank you in three Indigenous languages: wela'lin (Mi'kmaq), maarsii (Michif), and qujannamiik (Inuktitut).

INDIGENOUS NATIONS ACROSS CANADA

The territory presently known as Canada is home to a large number of Indigenous Nations who have lived and thrived on the land since time immemorial. The diversity of Indigenous Nations and Peoples across Canada is evident in thousands of distinct languages, customs, and relationships to the land. However, common threads among all Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island are experiences of colonization and cultural genocide enacted by Western governments since the first arrival of European settlers centuries ago. Some of these colonial actions include displacement of Indigenous communities from their traditional land, imposition of violent Western forms of governance, and the theft and forced removal of Indigenous children from their families to be placed into foster care or church- or state-operated Residential Schools that forbade the practice of Indigenous cultures.[2]

A HISTORY OF COLONIAL OPPRESSION

We also note that settler colonial violence enacted upon Indigenous Peoples in Canada both reflects and is connected to the oppression of colonized Peoples in other parts of the world (eg, similarities between the South African apartheid system and Canadian laws

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regarding Indigenous Peoples[3]).

As a result of continued colonialism and systemic anti-Indigenous racism in various sectors such as healthcare, education, governance, etc., many Indigenous individuals have been disconnected from their culture, lands, and communities—and many communities experience significant health disparities.[2] Indigenous health disparities are in large part due to Canada's colonial history and inequitable access to and distribution of resources.[4-6]

The Residential School System and Canada's deleterious Indigenous policies therein stand as one of the most compelling examples of the impact of colonialism on the overall health of Indigenous Peoples,[7] with Indigenous scholars such as Charlotte Reading describing colonialism itself as a social determinant of health for Indigenous Peoples.[8] Indigenous lives are further negatively impacted by systemic and interpersonal racism, including in health and social services, leading to a lack trust in public institutions.[4,9] However, beautiful stories of resistance, resilience, and cultural reclamation are found throughout Indigenous communities, including among the narratives in this manuscript.

THE OT PROFESSION AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The OT profession is complicit in these harms and has been critiqued for its colonial underpinnings. OT theories and practice models based on Western ideologies have been highlighted as a source of conflict when working with Indigenous Peoples.[10-16] In an article newly published in the Journal of Occupational Science, Pride[17] asks that we move beyond literature in the occupational science and therapy disciplines to deeply consider how the work of Indigenous scholars in Indigenous health, history, geography, and other disciplines can support reconciliation efforts in OT.

MOVING TOWARD RECONCILIATION

In recent years, the historical and ongoing colonization of Indigenous Peoples and its continuing harms are finally coming to light through inquiries such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada[2] and the inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples[18] as prominent examples. Both inquiries illuminate the ongoing systemic discrimination, racism, harms—but also call on Canada to move toward a goal of reconciliation.

Enacting reconciliation within the Canadian context is a multifaceted endeavour,[19] encompassing strategies such as increased self-determination among Indigenous governments, the return of stolen land to Indigenous Nations, and bringing public awareness to the full stories of atrocities such as the Residential School System. Yet, the term reconciliation itself is critiqued for being largely ambiguous without a shared common understanding of how best to enact it.[19] Nonetheless, striving toward this reconciliation also requires effort at all levels of Canadian society, including within individual professions such as OT.[14]

The work required involves decolonization – described as the need to dismantle colonial systems and decrease the power they currently hold[20] in favour of creating new and dynamic systems.[21] At the same time, decolonizing work must involve supporting systems grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and according them space and power to thrive.[22] We must listen to the concerns of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang around decolonization as process slipping into metaphor[23] – which requires continual engagement in both dialogue and critiques of process.

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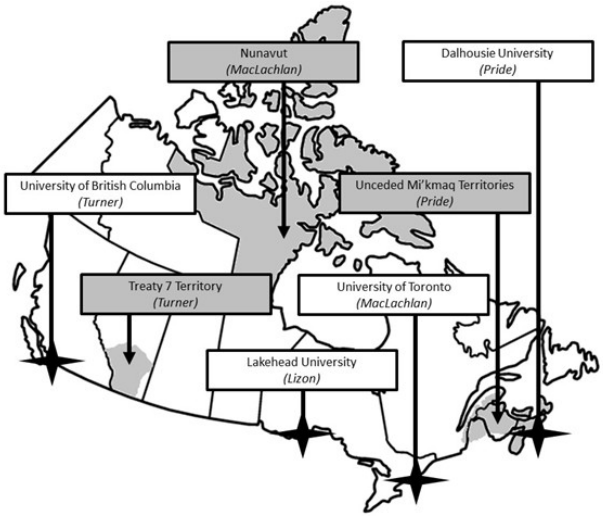
THREE STORIES

Utilizing a storytelling approach, three of us (Turner, Pride, and MacLachlan) offer stories below, while the fourth author (Lizon) supported the vision of bringing these stories together to contribute to dialogue regarding reconciliation, Indigenous knowledges, and occupational therapy. All four of us believe in the power of collaborative storytelling and we hope our stories from diverse regions of Canada (Figure 1) as Indigenous and Indigenous-allied individuals offer the reader lessons in how occupational therapists can work toward reconciliation while understanding the challenges and areas of action for all in OT. If you are unfamiliar with the Canadian context, we believe our stories can impart wisdom that is applicable to international efforts at decolonizing the OT profession.

Figure 1: Outline Map of Canada with Locations of Co-Authors Indicated



Note: The map is not to scale; the elements shown on the map are approximated to their true location/region. Four-point stars indicate the universities at which this manuscript's authors were studying at the time of writing: University of British Columbia, Lakehead University, University of Toronto, and Dalhousie University. The geographic regions that the co-authors discuss in their narratives are shaded in gray (Treaty 7 Territory[1], Nunavut, and Unceded Mi'kmaq Territories). Universities and geographic regions are named in rectangular boxes, each including their corresponding author's last name written in italics. This figure includes an adapted image licensed freely for commercial and noncommercial use across print and digital platforms with no attribution required under the Pixaby License (https://pixabay.com/service/license/).

[1] With respect to the term "Treaty 7 Territory", the government of Canada signed 11 numbered treaties with various First Nations from 1871-1921. Each treaty encompasses a different geographical area and includes a list of agreements between Canada and the signatory First Nations regarding land ownership, resource extraction, and provision of funding and services by the federal government to Indigenous communities. The territory of Treaty 7 is located in southern Alberta. Readers interested in learning more about the numbered treaties (including critical perspectives) can find additional information at:https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/numbered-treaties

Justin's Story

My name is Justin Turner and I am an occupational therapist and recent PhD graduate in Rehabilitation Sciences from the University of British Columbia (UBC), whose main campus is located on the traditional, unceded territory of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) People. Although I am grateful for the opportunity to live and learn on these lands that feature endless Pacific Ocean waves, towering coastal mountains, and ancient cedar trees, I am originally from a different region of Canada (southern Alberta) that is far from the ocean and falls within the (overlapping) traditional territories of several First Nations and the Indigenous Nation to which I belong:

the Métis Nation.

The part of southern Alberta where I was born and raised is part of a larger region today called the Canadian Prairies. This area is marked by a flowing landscape of grassy hills, vast riverways, and limitless sky. The land has given me an open-hearted perspective on life and new experiences, which I carry with me wherever I go. I wonder sometimes whether my ancestors who lived on the Prairies felt the same about this land (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Photo of Red Deer River Valley in Treaty 7 Territory, Southern Alberta

Note: Photo captured by Justin Turner on May 17, 2020 in Kneehill County, Alberta overlooking the Red Deer River valley from Orkney Viewpoint. The top half of the image shows an afternoon sky with many Cumulus mediocris clouds. In the lower half of the image, the Red Deer River is shown winding its way through a two-kilometres-wide valley that varies from 80-150 metres in depth. Several distinct sedimentary layers can be seen on the hilly sides of the valley. The land at the bottom of the valley is mostly covered in grass, with some shrubs and deciduous trees located near the river.

In addition to the region's natural beauty, the Canadian Prairies have a complex and multicultural history—which I see reflected in my own family tree. On my dad's side of the family, I am descended from European settlers who built farmsteads in western Canada during the 19th century on lands that were coercively taken from Indigenous Nations by colonial governments. In particular, the land where my paternal ancestors settled was located within the traditional territory of my Métis maternal ancestors (the Homeland of the Métis), which overlaps with the territories of other Indigenous Nations such as the Anishinaabe, Blackfoot, Cree, and Sioux Peoples.

For readers who are unfamiliar with the Métis Nation, some of our cultural practices include the Red River Jig dance, engagement in hunting, fishing, and berry-picking, and a distinct style of beading called flower beadwork—from which the Métis are sometimes nicknamed *the Flower Beadwork People*. Other names for our people include *Otipemisiwak* (meaning "the people who rule themselves" in Cree) and *âpihtawikosisân* (meaning "half-son" in Cree). The Métis People constitute one of the largest Indigenous Nations in Canada and I am proud to be a Métis Nation citizen.

As a reader, you might ask: why is Justin sharing all these details about his family history in a manuscript about OT and reconciliation in Canada? My short answer would be that I agree with Indigenous scholars such as Dwayne Donald,[24] who position stories and relationships as fundamental in repairing social fractures caused by forces like colonialism. By hearing another person's life story or learning about another culture, we help to build greater empathy in our world.

I think this fact is intuitive for most occupational therapists, since our work involves listening to all kinds of people's stories, reflecting upon how their lives are

impacted by personal and environmental challenges, and problem-solving how to help them achieve specific functional goals despite those challenges. With that perspective in mind, I want to share a story about my mother that relates to Indigenous reconciliation.

I have many early memories of being on the land with my mom, such as looking for dinosaur fossils in the hilly and cactus-covered terrain of the Prairies, driving past miles of purple flax and yellow canola fields to visit one of my aunties, or swimming in a muddy lake on a hot summer day. As an adult, all of these memories are precious to me and stand out in my mind like brightly-coloured flowers. I think my favourite childhood recollections of my mom, though, involve picking *lii pwayr* ("saskatoon berries" in Michif) with her by the Red Deer River.

She had grown up by the river and, over the years, found locations where the saskatoon bushes would be absolutely weighed down with the delicious purple fruit—which is an important cultural and nutritional plant for Indigenous communities across Western Canada, including the Métis People. When she took me and my brother berry picking, we always brought several empty ice cream pails which we would fill to the brim and have to effortfully carry back to the car. By the time we drove home, all of our hands and faces would be stained dark purple, partially from the act of picking the berries and partially from shoveling dozens of them into our mouths. Once home, we would freeze most of the pails, give a few to friends and neighbours, and use some fresh saskatoons to make pies, muffins, and jelly.

When I became a young adult and moved away from home to attend OT school at UBC, I found myself missing the slightly sour and mildly sweet taste of the saskatoon. I was living in Vancouver at the time and asked at a local farmer's market whether they sold the berry, but was met with a quizzical stare from the merchant. I decided that, when I was back in southern Alberta next berry season, I would get my mom to take me to a saskatoon bush spot by the river. Unfortunately, I never got that chance. After a two-year battle with a rare type of cancer called embryonal rhabdomyosarcoma, my mother passed away in March 2017.

Over the course of her illness, my mom fought her cancer as hard as she could, accessing every available evidence-based treatment and listening diligently to her oncological team. I was able to attend some health appointments with her, meeting many lovely medical professionals along the way. Health workers who stand out in my mind include a creative physiotherapist who helped my mom walk again after her cancer treatment necessitated a leg amputation and a palliative care nurse who had a kind demeanour and wonderful sense of humour.

In addition to the experiences of receiving dignified healthcare, I also witnessed my mom face racism from the health system for being Indigenous. In one instance, I waited with her for several hours in the emergency department while she was in excruciating pain after the admitting nurse—who seemed to buy into racist stereotypes—implied my mom had a substance use disorder and was faking her symptom severity in order to obtain unneeded prescription painkillers. Unfortunately, stories like this are common among Indigenous people trying to receive help from healthcare providers.

Now that I am a healthcare worker myself, I often think of the negative experiences my mom faced during her cancer journey and endeavour to be an advocate for people whose identities are marginalized

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by society. I try to emulate the staff who created positive experiences for my mom and our whole family, which involves avoiding assumptions about those I am caring for and enacting therapeutic use of self to develop better relationships. I also center my practice in principles of trauma-informed care (TIC), which is an approach to working with individuals who have survived "singular or cumulative experiences that result in adverse effects on functioning."[25(p1)] TIC emphasizes respect for diversity, offering autonomy and choice, transparency about organizational policies and care plans, a "belief that recovery is possible for all,"[25(p2)] and other actions related to fostering a safe relationship between service providers and service users.

Outside my OT work, my mom influences my life in countless ways. She was a beautiful Métis woman with a friendly smile, a warm personality, and a love of dancing. I feel connected to her whenever I hike somewhere with hilly terrain, swim in a natural body of water, or go for walks by the river—though now as a university student in Vancouver it is by the Fraser River in BC where I can most often be found rather than at *wâwâskêsiw-sîpiy* (Cree word for the Red Deer River and its connected waterways).

During spring and summer 2020, I found myself living back home in southern Alberta for a few months as the COVID-19 pandemic forced my PhD studies to go entirely online. While there, I went searching for my mom's favourite berry-picking spot. Surprisingly, I found the location from memory, as though its coordinates were ingrained somewhere within me.

When I got there, however, the area was blocked off by a petroleum company with a big "no trespassing" sign posted on the fence. I also looked down toward the river from the fence and saw the spot with the bushes was gone, with a gravel parking lot now covering the land. I felt a horrible sad feeling that my beloved berry bush—the spot my mom had shown me and that she had perhaps learned about from another family member—now ceased to exist.

After I recovered a bit from the initial shock of the berry bush being destroyed, I reflected on how this experience and many more traumatic losses are so common among Indigenous individuals in Canada and worldwide. Dispossessed of our lands and barred from engaging in our cultural practices, all Indigenous Peoples have faced loss of occupation due to ongoing settler colonialism.[26]. Over generations, these losses create a compounded grief that Indigenous Peoples carry in everyday life.

Those who possess power and privilege, including healthcare professionals like occupational therapists, must learn about Indigenous Peoples' histories and cultures in order to enact reconciliation. They must practice in a trauma-informed manner. They must advocate with Indigenous individuals who are accessing the healthcare system, as well as for the rights of Indigenous Peoples at large. By reading my story in this article—as well as those of my friends Tara and Janna that follow—I hope the reader will draw some inspiration to work toward decolonization and reconciliation.

Tara's Story

Kwe. Taluisi Tara Pride, I am Mi'kmaw and a member of Sipekne'katik First Nation on my father's side, and of European ancestry on my mother's side. I have spent my entire life exploring and residing in Mi'kma'ki—the unceded territories of the Mi'kmaq.

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Mi'kma'ki encompasses the easternmost parts of the land now called Canada, as well as part of the American state of Maine. I have fond childhood memories, surrounded by family and friends, of exploring this beautiful land that I've called home.

Figure 3: Photo of the Cliffs off Glace Bay in Unama'ki (Cape Breton Island), Nova Scotia

Note: Photo captured by Tara Pride on August 29th, 2015 at the tip of Glace Bay on Cape Breton Island (Unama'ki), Nova Scotia (NS), while spending a few weeks with family and friends. The changes to these cliffs over the past 20 years are astounding. When I was a child, you could explore the beaches and extensive cliffs around the area. Now, much of the area is blocked off or deemed unsafe due to severe erosion, including many houses. This region that I grew up knowing and thoroughly enjoying has been slowly slipping away into the ocean.

In my early life, I was not provided the opportunity to engage with Mi'kmaq culture and ways of being for reasons related to colonialism. My father was placed into foster care in the 1960s—removed from his family, and placed with a white family in Glace Bay, Cape Breton. His story is not unique for many Indigenous children in Canada, and represents an example of the Sixties Scoop and the consequences of colonial policies. The Sixties Scoop saw the deliberate removal of Indigenous children from their families to assimilate them into European culture. His foster care experience was never spoken about in his household growing up, but I do know that my grandmother gave him everything she could. He grew up in an environment that was loving, family oriented, and kind.

In my father's adult years, his interest in his biological family grew. He found out over a four- or five-year search that he was a citizen of the Mi'kmaq Nation and had many biological siblings. He searched for as many siblings as he could find to connect with. I consider these series of events as major turning points in the trajectory of *my own* life, as I proceeded to undertake my own journey in exploring my Mi'kmaw identity, the community I am a member of, and my family connections.

It was through this quest for knowledge, for family, and for understanding, that we uncovered more than we could have imagined. Some information I wish I had known earlier; some I wish I had never learned of at all. It took over 15 years to find out that my father had a sibling who lived 10 minutes away from where he grew up; the records were sealed. All of these years; the time wasted; this reality is one many Indigenous families have experienced due to decades of ongoing colonialism and colonial control.

I start off this narrative work with a personal account as it provides a glimpse of who I am, and why I see things in the way I do. It represents my worldview and understandings of the world. As Indigenous scholar Margaret Kovach says:

"We know what we know from where we stand"[27(p7)]

Without knowing where I stand, my context, or my experiences, how I view the world would lack important context. Teachings I've received have shown me that context is incredibly important in Indigenous cultures; I hope my own context is interwoven throughout this narrative. What will follow is my story—one that embodies a search for purpose while simultaneously experiencing an identity crisis. Who *am* I? Though still present in my consciousness, these questions have become clearer over the years. I write this from my perspective as (first and foremost) a Mi'kmaw woman reclaiming identity, but also as a wife, a daughter, a sister, a niece, a cousin, an occupational therapist, and an academic.

Throughout my time at secondary school, I experienced a deep internal conflict. At school I often heard racism and hate expressed toward those who come from equity-deserving groups. Meanwhile, I had witnessed many instances in which my father experienced discrimination and racism simply for the way he looked. For me, this experience was different. Although I am Mi'kmaw, I did not experience overt discrimination due to the way that I looked. I had (and still have) white passing privilege. My skin tone was *light enough* that I was able to choose who I disclosed this information to, and when. My safety was somewhat guarded; resulting in me feeling as though I was living in two worlds. This experience is ongoing for me—and deeply impacted, and continues to impact, the way I engage in a variety of occupations.

My undergraduate and graduate school experiences were influential, but also incredibly challenging. I completed my undergraduate degree in psychology from Dalhousie University and, immediately afterwards, went on to study OT at the same school. This career choice was exciting; I had always wanted to work in some area of healthcare, and OT appeared at first glance to align well with what I envisioned helping people to be. It moved away from a strictly medical model toward understanding the complexities of human experience.

I saw similarities between OT and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, such as a holistic view of health, the importance of community wellbeing, and notions of relationality and relational accountability. This sentiment is shared by other Indigenous occupational therapists who choose to enter the profession.[15]

During my OT training, I learned how to be a 'good' practitioner, how to treat and support individuals, and how to (still working on this one) describe OT. But the tension I thought would resolve itself deep within me was still there—ever present. Given its origins, the OT profession is grounded on and derived from Western ways of knowing and seeing the world.[10-16]

Therefore, I am left to wonder how as Indigenous people we stay true to our own ways of knowing, being, and seeing the world while simultaneously taking up education that privileges, values, and draws mainly from Western ways of seeing and being in the world? This question is one I've come to learn is ever-present in the minds of many Indigenous students and healthcare practitioners, and one that has guided my work ever since.

I did a lot of work throughout my OT training, and subsequently in my doctoral work, reconciling this question. I began to actively identify areas of OT practice that didn't quite sit well with what I knew and what I've experienced as a Mi'kmaw person. This thinking was timely, as the TRC had just completed years of work and published their findings, which

included *94 Calls to Action* for Canadian society to enact reconciliation.[28] I did research and began talking to whomever I could.

I found a mentor at the OT school who accepted, valued, and encouraged my challenges and questioning of the Western underpinnings of OT and the impacts on this for Indigenous Peoples and communities. At the same time, I started a position as the Regional Coordinator of the Atlantic Indigenous Mentorship Network. In that position, I collaborated with Indigenous graduate students, academics, community members, and allied Indigenous health scholars to better support Indigenous learners in post-secondary spaces. These experiences have led me to where I am today—working as an educator and researcher to identify ways to support Indigenous-led programming and research.

A few key points can be gleaned from this story:

- The field of OT currently is not necessarily a safe space for Indigenous learners and clinicians.[15,17,29]
- Yet, we know that Indigenous Peoples have so much to contribute—as evidenced by the wealth of Indigenous scholarship emerging in health, geography, social sciences, engineering, and many other areas.
- The OT profession does a disservice to all learners and clinicians when we only draw from and privilege Western ideologies and worldviews.
- Finally, we do not yet fully understand the occupational impacts of Indigenous learners and clinicians who come into OT and don't feel welcomed or as if they belong; this is something the OT profession must urgently address if we are to advance toward reconciliation.

I wish to connect these experiences and key points to the guiding principle of **Etuaptmumk** (**Two-Eyed Seeing)**. Etuaptmumk (loosely translated to *the gift of multiple perspectives*) is a guiding principle conceptualized in the Atlantic region by Mi'kmaw Elders Drs. Albert and Murdena Marshall, and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett.

Etuaptmumk recognizes that if society wishes to begin addressing the major crises we are currently facing—health, social, or environmental—there is a need to move beyond simply considering Western ways of knowing and knowledge systems as the sole holders of relevant information.[30] There is a need to utilize Western and Indigenous ways of knowing (among others as well) to meaningfully address the challenges we face.[30] Importantly, this concept is place-based, and other Indigenous Nations and communities likely have differing terms that describe similar understandings.

Theoretically, this sounds rather straightforward; practically, Etuaptmumk has proven to be of great importance, but also of great complexity to put into action, given that colonization and colonialism continue to dominate society through systems of oppression, privilege, and power. Etuaptmumk requires recognition of the *value* of multiple perspectives—meaning settlers have an obligation to appreciate, value, and support Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous sovereignties. At this time, I'm not sure this is something mainstream society is entirely, truly, and meaningfully ready to embrace; however, engaging in dialogue is an important first step.

Linking this to my identity and (re)connecting to Mi'kmaq culture, Etuaptmumk has helped me understand that my identity doesn't need to be an

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'either-or.' I believe this guiding principle and its teachings offer a lot to the profession of OT, as well, which has not meaningfully engaged with how to embody a process that values epistemological pluralism and other ways of being and doing.

Although Two-Eyed Seeing is mentioned in the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy Indigenous Health practice document,[31] we have work to do in order to embody this guiding principle. We have a strong, growing community of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous OT professionals who work within institutions, in hospitals, and in communities—all places where meaningful change can, and needs to, occur.

Throughout my work, one of the resounding statements I've heard regarding what OT can do is simply to listen and take guidance from those who know their people and their communities best. If we are truly and meaningfully able to do this as a first step, we could radically transform our profession. This allows for a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding of the world, which inevitably supports diverse populations we aim to serve.

OT has a long way to go to enact reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples—and radical change is needed. When I say we need to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, I don't mean we should simply add Indigenous content into our curriculum and profession and stop there. Métis scholar Adam Gaudry and Danielle Lorenz critique this action as mere 'Indigenous inclusion.'[32] The addition of Indigenous content into and across OT curricula is an important preliminary step, but it should not be the end.

There is a dire need to move beyond preliminary actions toward a curriculum (and more broadly, a university) system that embeds Indigenous knowledge systems into every facet of programming. We are not there yet, and it will take many years, but this is how I envision our profession showing leadership toward advancing reconciliation and enacting the 94 Calls to Action.[28]

Janna's Story

Ullukkut. Janna MacLachlan*ngujunga; pigartulirijiujunga.* [Inuktitut to English translation: Hello. My name is Janna MacLachlan. I am someone who helps someone who has difficulty (pigartuliriji is a term commonly used for occupational therapist)]. This is how I would commonly introduce myself in my occupational therapy practice in Nunavut. (Note: An earlier version of this story appeared in the author's doctoral dissertation.[33])

Early in my doctoral studies, I met an occupational therapist at a professional event who asked about my research. I shared that I was interested in helping to improve rehabilitation services offered to Indigenous communities in Northern Canada. She responded, "Oh, there's so much opportunity for OT up there, isn't there?" I said, with a bit of an annoyed tone, "Actually, sometimes I think OT needs to get out of the way." She appeared to be taken aback by my comment, but at that very moment the event started and our conversation was cut short. I felt bad that I didn't have a chance to explain where I was coming from. But I'll explain it now to you, the reader. More importantly, I will share what I've learned since then and consider the kind of response I hope to verbalize in the future. The story I offer here is a snapshot of

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one thread of my ongoing learning journey about my place, and the place of OT in reconciliation in Canada.

I am a White woman of settler descent who grew up in rural Mi'kma'ki. I studied to become an occupational therapist in southwestern Ontario and graduated in 2006. With an interest in being a generalist and wanting to experience a new part of Canada, I took a job in Nunavut, one of Canada's northern territories. As noted by Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, Nunavut's formation was the result of Canada's largest Indigenous land claim, providing Inuit with the opportunity to govern a large part of their homeland.[34] Beyond this and the little I had gleaned from high school and undergraduate social studies and history classes, I knew close to nothing about the People I would be working with.

And so, I started practicing, somewhat naively, following the norms and approaches I had learned in Ontario. I took a beginner Inuktitut language class and there were occasional work-sanctioned education days when we would get to go on the land and learn about Inuit culture. However, it didn't seem that this learning ever penetrated healthcare practices. Even from my early days working in Nunavut, I felt that my services weren't quite on the mark with what many Inuit, especially families with young children, were looking for.

After 10 years of periodically working in Nunavut, I began my doctoral studies at the University of Toronto, seeking to interrogate these gut feelings and learn about ways to do better. I took courses in Indigenous research methods and critical social theory. I began learning about healthcare's White, Eurocentric norms and how harmful they can be for Indigenous people seeking care. I began reflecting on how the Government of Nunavut expected all its services to be informed by Inuit Societal Values and *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (the Inuit worldview), but I couldn't say if or how any aspect of my practice had aligned with them. I didn't know; I'd never asked. I learned about Indigenous rights, including self-determination, which, among other things, involves Indigenous Peoples being able to shape the systems that serve their communities.[35]

I also learned of a resource developed by Inuit Elders and the local health research center about parenting from Inuit perspectives (Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre[36]). This resource included tips for parents on supporting development for children at different ages. It was a far cry from the standardized developmental assessments I had been doing with Inuit children for years. I felt frustrated that I spent so much time counting how many blocks a child could stack when I hadn't asked parents about the child's relationship to the land or the community.

It was clear that my Western lens had a different focus from that of many Inuit I worked with. It was amid this learning that I attended the professional event where I tersely suggested to a colleague that we occupational therapists need to get out of the way. Her comment had struck me as White saviourism and classic settler colonialism: a population with relative power assuming they could move in and find "opportunities." But my learning was not (and will never be) finished.

From there I went on to complete my dissertation research where I met with Inuit to discuss how rehabilitation services should be offered to Inuit children. I went in essentially open to burning the whole thing down. Except no one handed me a match. None of the participants, despite having witnessed colonialism on their lands in innumerable forms for their whole lives, said "less OT, please." In fact,

participants expressed that they want more OT, but a more relevant OT: one that's welcoming, grounded in Inuit values, and provided in Inuktitut. I learned it wasn't OT that needed to get out of the way, but the Western worldview and power that guided it.[33] It's a nuanced but essential distinction. I am hoping that the guidance provided by study participants can help to evolve rehabilitation services offered in Nunavut to be more contextually relevant.

There is much work to be done, not the least of which is having more Inuit occupational therapists. I can study Inuktitut and learn everything I can about *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*, but I will never be *Inuk*. (Inuk [person] is the singular form of Inuit [people] in Inuktitut.) Therefore, I will never be able to fully represent the Inuit worldview in my practice.[33] But I still can do better, and I've sensed changes in my school-based practice as I've learned and grown over the course of my research.

Figure 4: Photo of Umimmak School in Grise Fiord, Nunavut, one of the schools I have had the privilege of working with.

Note: Photo captured by Janna MacLachlan at Grise Fiord, Nunavut, in January 2021. Image shows a school and playground equipment, with mountains in the background. The ground and mountains are covered with snow. The photo was taken at midday during the dark season of winter when the sun doesn't come above the horizon, making the photo appear to be taken at night.

One change I have implemented in my practice is to put more emphasis on relationships. Relationship-based care is advocated by many Indigenous groups as being aligned with Indigenous worldviews.[37,38] As a White stranger entering communities where people have witnessed many harmful policies and practices enforced by White strangers, including child apprehension, forced displacement for medical treatment, and slaughtering of sled dogs,[2,39] I recognize that it is my responsibility to get to know people and not presume to know what will benefit them. I am also learning about what it means to actually be holistic and strengths-based in my practice.

Spoiler alert: this doesn't include categorizing children into standardized percentiles. Through my research project, I learned that Inuit might approach supporting child development in terms of what a child is ready to work on next rather than thinking about catching them up to a socially-constructed "norm" defined by people living thousands of kilometers from Nunavut. Participants emphasized that every child has something to offer their community, no matter what their abilities are.[33]

Our intervention will be the same whether we start with what a child is ready to work on, or start at a point X degrees from a "norm." We just skip the part where we tell them how un-normal they are. I began to wonder why we assume that tools developed in one cultural context should be valid everywhere.

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Our neoliberal systems of productivity would have us efficiently assess and discharge clients on a factory conveyor belt. But if we don't have relationships and see only what we think we need to fix, we have nothing. I was once at a team meeting at a school where a new colleague exclusively reported on a child's developmental assessment scores and informed teachers of what they urgently needed to do to address the child's delay. The therapist spoke as though her expert view (from a few hours with the child) held authority, dismissing the perspectives of the teachers (who worked with the child every day). The teachers and I were angry and hurt by the therapist's approach that lacked any spark of the smart and fun youngster we knew. It lacked acknowledgement of all the wonderful things the teachers were doing and the progress the child had made. A strengths-based approach would have been culturally relevant, and beyond that, more respectful.[40]

This brings me to another lesson we might take from my learning about reconciling how I practice OT in Inuit communities: the shifts I'm learning to make in my practice might also be appreciated by other people in other places.

The changes I'm learning to make, to offer a better OT service to Inuit, are both minimal and profound. I still draw on the OT knowledge base, but prioritize Inuit- and contextually-relevant sources, and aim to start from an entirely different point of departure and weighting of priorities in my practice. When I orient according to strengths and start with a priority on relationships, I still focus on occupation, I'm still an occupational therapist, but I end up with a very different result.

I remain open to OT in Nunavut having a different shape, different borders, and a different ontology and epistemology than OT in other contexts. OT in Nunavut can't and shouldn't fit into the boxes prescribed by the neoliberal, Eurocentric status quo. To resist this will take effort. The work of decolonizing OT in Canada has hardly gotten started, from my perspective.

I'm still learning what I need to do, even as I act to do better. I don't have answers; I can only share my experiences and lessons learned. What could I say to occupational therapists I meet at future professional events? My mind turns to the concept of relational accountability, an important feature of Inuit epistemology (as described in Healey and Tagak[41]). What can I say that is accountable to the relationships I have with Nunavummiut (people of Nunavut)? How can I affirm the strengths of Nunavut and Inuit, and not just reinforce the usual narrative about Indigenous communities in Canada that is so focused on deficits?

In moments when my mile-a-minute-Western-trained brain is present enough to be attuned to it, I have observed Inuit Elders model humility, empathy, and reciprocity in their answers to questions. What can I learn from this that might help me frame a different, and more helpful, response? Maybe, I could say that I believe there's a lot of opportunity for occupational therapists to learn and support the building of a contextually-relevant OT as directed by Inuit.

Conclusion

A common thread throughout each of the stories presented is how colonization led to a disruption of where we stand. For Justin, it was physical land. For Tara, it was identity. For Janna, it was navigating her role as a settler. Reconciliation is, in part, a search for

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a more solid collective footing. This footing must be one that benefits everyone in Canada, requiring significant work to uphold Indigenous rights and support healing from colonial harms.

OT actions to resist the impact of colonial forces on occupation can't happen solely at the level of individual intervention between a therapist and Indigenous person receiving services. To truly respond to national and international documents like the TRC Calls to Action[2] and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,[35] changes must primarily happen at systems, political, and institutional levels.

This large-scale change is necessary to:

- Improve university curricula.
- Make space and validation for non-Western means of assessment and intervention.
- Resist the apprehension and destruction of Indigenous lands.
- Protect and affirm Indigenous rights.
- Ensure that Indigenous occupational therapists can be themselves in their workplaces, so that the OT community can provide a welcoming environment to more Indigenous occupational therapists.

We invite readers of this work to reflect on our stories and draw from them lessons that are relevant to the work they currently engage in. We feel as though this is one of the key purposes for weaving both stories and critical thoughts together in this work—to avoid attempts to guide readers on exactly 'what' to do, but instead to invite critical reflection based on context and experience. This work won't always be comfortable, it won't be easy, but we can do it with empathy, humility, love, and respect in our hearts.

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About the Authors

Tara Pride, PhD, OT Reg. (NS), is a citizen of the Mi'kmaw Nation and member of Sipekne'katik First Nation in Mi'kma'ki. She is an occupational therapist and Assistant Professor in the School of Occupational Therapy at Dalhousie University where her research program focuses on Indigenous community-led research, Indigenous mentorship, and challenging ongoing colonality in the health professions.

Justin Turner, MOT, PhD, is an occupational therapist and educator based in British Columbia, Canada. In his research, teaching, and clinical practice, Justin weaves together perspectives from the occupational therapy profession and from his cultural identity as a member of the Métis Nation.

Monique Lizon, MPH, OT Reg. (Ont.) is an occupational therapist registered in Ontario with a clinical background in mental health. She is currently the Director of Advocacy and Practice at the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapy (CAOT).

Janna MacLachlan, PhD, OT Reg. (Ont.), is an occupational therapist and researcher living in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Her research engages action-oriented and community-based approaches, and Inuit and critical methodologies. The objectives of research she engages in often relate to supporting anti-oppressive practices and foregrounding Inuit ways of knowing in health and social services and systems on Inuit lands.

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