



**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 & Yang, 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 Qaujimagatuqangit 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

A photograph of a snowy town at night, illuminated by warm yellow lights from buildings and street lamps. A vibrant green aurora borealis is visible in the dark sky above the town.

Questions?

Quyanimmik!  
Thank you!

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