Enacting the Otipemisiwak Worldview: Reflections from One Métis Clinician and Researcher

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Applying one's cultural teachings to their research or clinical practice is an important endeavour that requires intensive reflection. I recently had the honour of studying in detail my Métis or Otipemisiwak culture by taking a class called Advanced Métis Studies taught by a respected Métis Elder. In this article, I document some specific learnings from the course, and reflect on how to apply them to both my occupational therapy clinical practice and my research praxis as a PhD student. I offer specific and more theoretical applications of Otipemisiwak culture to my own life and encourage the reader to engage in a similar reflective process regarding their own culture. This article also serves as a chance to introduce myself to other Indigenous health researchers.

Keywords

Métis, Occupational therapy, Rehabilitation, Métissage, Indigenous methodologies

Introduction

From January to April 2020, I had the honour of taking a class entitled Advanced Métis Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), taught by respected Métis Elder Earl Henderson (Henderson, 2008). My initial reasons for taking the class were two-fold. First, I am a Métis PhD student embarking on a research project in collaboration with other Indigenous communities, so I hoped Advanced Métis Studies would enable me to participate in some important reflections on Métis culture and its teachings regarding intercultural relations. Secondly, I

wanted to absorb some of Earl's wisdom as an Elder in our Métis community. I believe I have accomplished these two goals; however, my most important takeaway from Earl's teachings is a deepened appreciation for the beauty and uniqueness of my culture. In this paper, I will consider how to apply some of the teachings from Advanced Métis Studies to different parts of my personal and professional life. I am aware that the process of learning about one's culture is a lifelong endeavour; however, I have some initial reflections as a young Otipemisiwak that I wish to share with my community of learners and faculty. My hope for this paper is to encourage readers to reflect on their own journeys of reflection regarding their cultures with implementation into the various parts of their lives.

Background

To give some context about myself, my name is Justin Turner and my parents are James Turner and Corey Favell (see Figure 1). I was born in the spring of 1991 in Lethbridge, Alberta (AB) and have lived in various places throughout Alberta and British Colum-

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bia (Drumheller, Calgary, Irricana, Banff, Olds, Castlegar, Vancouver, Victoria, Fernie). My dad James was born in Vancouver, BC and has mixed European Settler ancestry from England, Scotland, and Norway. My mom, Corey, was born in Camrose, AB and is descended from Métis people from the Red River Settlement (some of our Métis family names include Favel and Favell, Dahl, Irvine, and McDonald). Most of my Métis Ancestors were identified as English and Scottish Half-breeds on historical records and I know some Métis people self-identify with the term Half-breed (Dahl, 2013), but when discussing my own cultural identity, I prefer Métis or Otipemisiwak (meaning the people who rule themselves in Cree [Ouellet & Hanson, 2009]). I currently live on the unceded territory of Lheidli T'enneh First Nation in Prince George, BC and am a member of the Prince George Métis Community Association (PGMCA), itself a Métis Chartered Community within the Métis Nation of BC (PGMCA, n.d.). Connecting with my local Métis community has been an incredibly rewarding process which has strengthened my Métis identity.

In addition to my Métis identity, I am an occupational therapist. Occupational therapists work with individuals and groups who are struggling to complete the activities which occupy their time and develop rehabilitative and compensatory strategies so the client(s) can get back to doing those meaningful occupations (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). I enjoy working as a clinician but have always wanted to push myself forward (and have been encouraged to do so by friends and family). In January 2020, I began a PhD program in Rehabilitation Sciences at UBC. My supervisor is Dr. Pat Camp and, together, we are undertaking a mixed-methods collaborative project with our First Nations partner organization, Carrier Sekani Family Services (CSFS), to learn how wildfires in North Central BC affect the Dakelh First Nations people and communities from the region, with an emphasis on people with lung health challenges ("Our People", n.d.). The Dakelh are the original inhabitants of the region now called Central Interior British Columbia. Some Dakelh Nations include Nadleh Whut'en, Lheidli T'enneh, and Wet'suwet'en First Nation. Now that you know a bit more about me and my research context, I want to lead you in this paper through my reflections, which describe how I have been integrat-

Figure 1. Photo of my mother Corey Favell (top left) who has Half-breed Métis ancestors from the Red River Settlement, my father James Turner (top right) who has European Settler ancestors from England, Scotland, and Norway, and me (middle) sitting on a motorcycle near Drumheller, AB. 1992.

ing the Métis worldview into my clinical and research work, and how I plan to do so in the future.

Reflections on Otipemisiwak Clinical Practice

Caring is an attribute that has always come naturally to me, and I believe I inherited this quality from both my Métis and non-Indigenous Ancestors. I remember at age five finding a dead gopher on my Auntie and Uncle's farm near Drumheller, which my cousin had shot the day before. I realize now that gophers are a nuisance to farmers because their holes can damage equipment and injure livestock, but as a child, all I could think was, "this poor creature, it's so sad." To commemorate the burrowing rodent's life, I held a small funeral for it, which my bemused parents and another cousin attended. I wonder now if I was intuitively honouring the gopher's life in the way many Indigenous cultures teach. The phrase "All my relations" is stated by many Indigenous People

during prayer and refers to the deep connection we feel between all things living and non-living, human and non-human (King, 1990). In any case, this innate empathy has followed me throughout my life, and has been a blessing and a curse.

At age 20, I suffered the rare autoimmune neurological condition of Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), which caused temporary paralysis in my entire body (Taubensee, 2019). In GBS, one's immune system attacks their peripheral nerves, like in multiple sclerosis (MS), except that GBS is usually reversible, whereas MS causes permanent nerve degeneration (Lopez, 2020). For several months, I could not walk, brush my teeth, get dressed, or toilet independently. Thankfully, I made a full recovery in a few months through intensive physical and occupational therapy, and with support from the people who care about me. In my months at the hospital with GBS, my room was rarely without a cousin, auntie, parent, or friend, which I have learned is common for many Indigenous hospital patients due to the collectivistic view in Indigenous cultures about healing and wellbeing.

Before my experience with GBS, I had worked in various social service jobs, all with an emphasis on helping and caring, including being a family support worker, child development assistant, and crisis phone line operator. After my recovery, it became clear I needed to use my unique experience about losing control of my own body functions and rehabilitation to help others in tangible ways. Around my 25th birthday, I was accepted into UBC's Master of Occupational Therapy program, and that September I began my clinical training. I graduated from the program in 2017, and have worked since then as an occupational therapist in several practice settings in Prince George, including acute surgical care (e.g., helping car accident survivors with multiple orthopedic injuries to return to independence and to return home), inpatient rehabilitation (e.g., working with brain-injured individuals to regain their daily life skills such as dressing, cooking, and parenting), and community-based mental health outreach (e.g., supporting people with schizophrenia to obtain meaningful work and volunteer opportunities). What I have learned from being an occupational therapist is that mastering clinical skills comes easily with time and reflective practice. The more challenging skill for me has been integrating the Otipemisiwak worldview into my therapy,

which is what I aspire to do to honour my Ancestors and provide culturally appropriate care to my clients who share my culture.

When I think of influences on my clinical practice, what immediately comes to mind are the occupational therapy practice models I learned at university, the teachings of my various clinical mentors, and the lessons I have learned from going through my own major health challenge. I wish I could list my Métis culture among those most significant and direct influences on my clinical practice, but so far in my experience, I cannot. However, there are examples from my clinical career during which I have felt very Métis. In early 2019, when there was still lots of snow on the ground, I ran a snowshoeing mental health group for people with severe and persistent mental illnesses. It was a wonderful experience being outside in nature while getting some exercise and, of course, engaging in an activity that my Ancestors would regularly do. In one of the group's sessions, I snowshoed to the top of Connaught Hill Park in Prince George and stumbled upon a herd of 20 deer, which is an animal I have come to view as spiritually significant to me. Aside from the snowshoeing group, I have felt my Otipemisiwak culture shine when

working with Indigenous Elders, which is a common experience in Prince George given the city's large Indigenous population (Provincial Health Services Authority, 2019). When working with the Elders, I am deliberately aware that I give extra time and attention to them because I know that they have more knowledge than I (indeed, I think I have learned more from many of my clients than they have from me). The question is, how can I apply this knowledge to my clinical practice moving forward?

Taking *Advanced Métis Studies* has given me a couple of tools to think about regarding Métis clinical practice. A highlight of my class is a new understanding of Métis people's struggles resulting from racist policies, such as the scrip system in which Métis people were dispossessed of their land from approximately 1870 to 1924 – as summarized in Schaeffer's 1997 documentary *The Métis Scrip System*. Some other examples of our collective trauma include: being forced to live in road allowance communities, as shown in Schaeffer and Cottrell's 1996 documentary *Road Allowance People*; feeling the need to hide our culture to assimilate into Canadian society, which is

demonstrated through Christine Welsh's search for her family's history in the movie *Women in the Shadows* (Bailey, 1991); and the astounding overrepresentation of Métis children in the Canadian foster care system as presented by Sherry Wildman, Social Worker from the Métis Commission for Children & Families of BC during a class on January 15, 2020. Indeed, my own Métis relatives and family have their own stories of trauma, some of which reflect these learnings from class, but I must admit to not fully appreciating how much the Métis have suffered as a people until now. Now that I better understand our history, I have a deepened pride that we are still here and continue to practice our ways of life. I am very motivated to enact Métis traditions as part of my clinical practice, which will include regularly wearing Métis symbols when I am working (e.g., L'Assomption sash lanyard with my employee ID), offering to say a prayer when I work with Métis clients, providing therapy in nature when it is appropriate and practical to do so, and learning some specific Indigenous healing techniques like the use of natural medicines (Barkwell, 2018). I would also like to structure future support groups like Indigenous sharing circles and employ the medicine wheel as an assessment and treatment tool – both are used successfully by Indigenous clinicians (Kirmayer et al., 2003). I also know that the more I understand myself and my own culture, the more I can be there to support others, so *Advanced Métis Studies* is not the end of learning about my people. Implementing the Métis ontology into my clinical practice will be an ongoing reflective process, and one that I also have been applying as a researcher.

Reflections on Otipemisiwak Research Praxis

Like my affinity to helping others, a curious mind is something that has been present within me for as long as I can remember. When I was a child, this manifested in developing obsessions about certain topics which, thankfully, my family supported (particularly my paternal grandparents). I was fascinated by geography and world maps starting in grade two or three, and quickly learned the names of every country and their capital city. I was particularly interested in geographic anomalies, especially small or big countries. At age 10, I read in the newspaper that the Prince and Prin-

cess of the tiny, doubly landlocked European country of Liechtenstein were visiting Southern Alberta so I boldly wrote them a letter requesting a private meeting to learn what it is like to live and be royalty in such a small place, which they obliged (see Figure 2). After geography, I became fascinated by astronomy, and at one point could recite the names of every celestial body in our solar system, including all the moons. In my teenage years, I became particularly obsessed with movies and pop culture, spending endless hours on the Internet Movie Database and learning the names of practically every prominent North American actor and singer. When I went to university, I channeled my curiosity to papers and assignments, and published my first peer-reviewed paper in 2014, which presented findings from a study of cross-language influences in French-English bilingual children's speech (Turner et al., 2014). Now, I am a researcher affiliated jointly between Carrier Sekani Family Services and the UBC Pulmonary Rehabilitation Research Laboratory, and I am investigating how Northern BC's wildfires affect First Nations people with lung health conditions.

A question that I have recently been interested in is how to implement the Otipemisiwak world-

Figure 2. Photo of newspaper article in Drumheller Mail documenting my meeting with Prince Alfred von Liechtenstein and Princess Raffaella von Liechtenstein in Lethbridge, AB. 2002.

view into my research? In another class I completed at UNBC, Advanced Qualitative Research Methodology, I learned about Métissage research praxis. In research, the concept of Métissage refers to bringing together different ontologies, often from separate cultural traditions, to create a new practice (Lowan-Trudeau, 2012). Burke and Robinson (2018) argue that “Métissage... [allows] researchers to mindfully and strategically choose from both Indigenous and Western research methods to craft frameworks that enable them to conduct research in a way that genuinely honours their lived realities” (p. 152). The exact manifestation of Métissage varies between researchers, and the concept is not exclusively used by Métis people. However, our history as cultural bridgemakers makes Métissage praxis a natural approach for many Otipemisiwak academics. For example, Lowan-Trudeau (2012) used the Métis infinity symbol to illustrate his Métissage research process of integrating Indigenous and non-Indigenous methods and perspectives into his doctoral work studying environmental education. I plan to use another Métis cultural symbol to illustrate my collaborative doctoral research process: our flower beadwork, which has influences from our First Nation and European Ancestors (Racette, 2011). At the same time, I think symbolism without action is meaningless, so I do need to think about practical ways to bring Métissage to life in my research, which I can model from parts of Métis people’s history.

One of the defining features of being Indigenous is our relationships with others. This teaching has been highlighted for me from various sources, such as my mother, Corey Favell, in the way she approached parenting and friendships, Shawn Wilson in his 2008 book *Research is Ceremony*, and learnings from this Advanced Métis Studies class. On our very first day, Earl taught the class about the phrase “all my relations”, which many Indigenous People say at the end of their prayers. What Earl shared with my class is that the phrase means we are connected to everything, and by saying it, we are trying to make the connection explicit. I view this perspective on connectedness and relationships as central to my current research project. I am a Métis student working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to understand some of the impacts of wildfires on people’s respiratory health. The goal of this research is to improve wildfire emergency response policies in the future, particularly with

regards to Indigenous Peoples.

Since I am working with humans, building relationships is of utmost importance to me. I have learned from Advanced Métis Studies that Métis people historically relied upon relationships with other Indigenous communities for survival. For example, Métis living in the Pembina region in the 1850s collaborated immensely with First Nations in the area during their buffalo hunt, which was “critical to forging lives on the Plains” (Hogue, 2015, p. 50). Meanwhile, Métis in the Île à la Crosse region developed a unique sharing economy with Cree and Dene people starting in the early nineteenth century, and Haggarty (2013) argues this cultural feature continues to define Northwestern Saskatchewan Métis. Today, many Métis individuals establish strong relationships with other Indigenous People and communities, as evidenced by Vowel’s “Statement of Solidarity with Wet’suwet’en Land Defenders” (2020), which is signed by nearly 500 Otipemisiwak from across Canada. It is in these traditions of pan-Indigenous relationships that I am inspired as a researcher. My work with humans and building relationships is of utmost importance to me and fits with my Métis worldview, which I have been privileged through my recent course work to begin to gain a greater understanding.

Final Reflections

The teachings from Advanced Métis Studies will inform my life as a clinician, as a researcher, and as a Métis individual. At the same time, my learning and understanding about my culture and heritage will continue throughout my lifetime. As an Indigenous person raised in and working in predominantly Western colonial structures, the process of decolonizing my own thinking and practices requires ongoing reflection. Taking Advanced Métis Studies has enabled me to engage in extensive reflective questioning, and it has been an honour to be guided by Earl’s wisdom during this process. I hope readers will consider how to incorporate their own cultures into everything they do, and how the expertise of our Elders is essential to do so.

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