

Border Crossings: Self-Determination Through Checkpoints

7th Biennial Conference on Developmental Disabilities: Health and Wellbeing
across the Lifespan Virtual Conference hosted from UBC November 26-27, 2020

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Introduction

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service System project (IECSS) is a longitudinal study of family interactions with institutions using empirical findings from institutional ethnography that has been ongoing since 2014. The presentation will focus on 20 families living in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, and along the border of Ontario and Quebec at Temiskaming, and examines the procedural and policy differences that families navigate across borders.

Method

Our key methodological approach in this research is Institutional Ethnography (IE). The intention of IE is to understand institutional cultures and practices from the standpoint of families. Institutional ethnography is concerned with how “ruling relations” shape everyday lives. Ruling relations are the administrative, managerial, professional, and discursive organization of the regulations, and the governing structures of a society (Smith, 2006 and 2009).

Mapping

Social relations are illuminated through research. Institutional mapping examines the ideology behind the institution, and the processes that are in place to do the work of the institution. Our aim is to provide empirical evidence of the ideology, the processes, and the social relations (Graheme, 1998) through documenting the work of families as they interact with early intervention and education. Fundamental to the approach is mapping the actual activities of the institution (Campbell & Gregor, 2008).

Wisdom Keepers from the District of Temiskaming have guided the work of the “Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project: a longitudinal study of familial viewpoints of early childhood disability services” from the outset. Their decision was influenced by several factors, chief among them being the care and concern they have for their children and grandchildren with disabilities who often experience marginalization and exclusion in accessing services. The focus of this 7-year study on hearing directly from Indigenous parents and other caregivers regarding their experiences in accessing services for their children was key to their decision. The Wisdom Keepers recognized the early years of childhood as a critical time of rapid development predictive of many social and developmental outcomes later in life. They concluded that the examination of how institutional frameworks in the early years affect Indigenous children with disabilities where the rates are almost double that of the general population was essential to the health and wellbeing of children.³

Research Questions:

1. What does mapping institutions teach us about ongoing colonization in early childhood disability services?

Institutions have processes that families and frontline workers must comply with in order to gain and maintain access to services. Mapping institutional interactions revealed these “ruling relations” impose colonial frameworks that are counter intuitive to Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

2. What borders must children and families cross in order to access the entitlements?

All children are entitled to equal access to health, education and safety. In Yellowknife and Temiskaming, Indigenous families must cross-borders to access developmental services. Most developmental services are administered by provincially or municipally organized agencies that operate from a colonial base absent of an Indigenous cultural lens. Both communities also have families crossing provincial borders to access services, from Yellowknife to Edmonton, and from Temiskaming First Nation to Temiskaming Shores.

3. How do border crossings undermine communities’ self-determination?

The more services a family has, the more the system demands from them in terms of time, money, energy and relationships etc. Referral processes and procedures families are required to navigate act as gatekeeping checkpoints that grant access to services based on theories of child development and disability that fails to consider or accommodate an Indigenous worldview.

Findings:

There are many borders within Canada. The maps below show Canada from the standpoint of Indigenous communities today (by Native-land.come)⁴; at the time of European contact⁵; and treaties and agreements between Indigenous and European Peoples with provincial and territorial boundaries depicted⁶. These maps illustrate the number of borders that have been claimed by colonial forces post-contact and imposed on the Peoples of Turtle Island. These borders define the governance structures and rights of people living within these political jurisdictions, including many Indigenous Peoples.

The families in our research regularly cross physical borders between provinces and territories and between rural and remote communities and cities to access developmental services for their children. As well, they cross cultural borders that require them to “code-switch” between worldviews that are embedded in procedure and policy rooted in a colonial framework. Different jurisdictions require different forms of compliance in order to participate and these physical and cultural border crossings place an inordinate burden families in the form of travelling and navigation as children move from one age category to another. Children gain or lose developmental services depending on their age, which contributes to the work of systems when they are put on a waitlist.

This study offers evidence of family actions that lead to self-determination and the acquisition of expertise in negotiating differences across boundaries. Jordan’s Principle is one example of a policy avenue that has the potential to engender self-determination, but the centuries long assertion of colonial rule and the erasure of cultural practice environments require Indigenous families to use the funding to purchase mainstream services. Therefore, mainstream agencies must ensure they actively engage in decolonizing approaches.

References:

1. Campbell, M., & Gregor, F. (2008). Mapping social relations: a primer in doing institutional ethnography. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
2. Graheme, P. R. (1998). Ethnography, Institutions, and the Problematic of the Everyday World, *Human Studies*, 21(4), pp. 347–360.
3. Haché, A. (2019). District of Temiskaming Elders' Council. Available at <http://inclusiveearlychildhood.ca/district-of-temiskaming-elders-council/>
4. <http://www.canadahistoryproject.ca/1500/> 5. <https://native-land.ca/>