Colonialism and the Rupturing of Indigenous Worldviews

of Impairment and Relational Interdependence:

A Beginning Dialogue towards Reclamation and Social Transformation

Heather Norris

Ryerson University

School of Disability Studies

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Heather Norris, School of

Disability Studies, Ryerson University. 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3.

Contact: hmnorris@ryerson.ca

Abstract

Impairment is a universal phenomenon, but it is given vastly different meanings in societies with

differing cultural, political and economic structures. Understandings of impairment from

Indigenous worldviews are grounded in a respect for the profound interdependency of all life in

all its diversity and difference, bound together in a spider web of relations. Following Erevelles'

(2011) exposition of disability as a sociopolitical construct created as a means of patrolling the

boundaries of citizenship through the control and manipulation of the constructed *Other* within a

neocolonial state, I show how from the time of European contact onward, a Eurocentric

interpretation of "disability" as an inherent lack of production-oriented capacity (and thus a

deviation from valued, normative standards) has influenced understandings of impairment and

disability within Indigenous societies in North America. This has marginalized people with

impairments, and also forms part of a larger colonial project of assigning negative values to all

forms of diversity and difference, marking them as deviations and as essentially synonymous

with "disability." At the same time, colonial relations of oppression and domination are

responsible for conditions that give rise to both impairment and disability. I argue that the

renewal and recentering of Indigenous worldview understandings of impairment and disability

would support transformational change in our society through the power of interdependency and

respectful relationships.

Keywords: Indigenous worldview; Eurocentric worldview; personalism; impairment,

disability; interdependency

L'incapacité est un phénomène universel, mais peut avoir des sens énormement diverses dans

des sociétés ayant des structures culturelles, politiques et économiques différentes. Les

definitions de l'incapacité suivant une conception du monde autochtones sont basées dans un profound respect pour les différences et la diversité de tout vie à travers des rapports tissant entre eux une véritable toile d'araignée de relations interdépendantes. J'utilise le concept du handicap comme construction sociopolitique que propose Erevelles (2011), créé afin de patrouiller les frontières de la citoyenneté à travers le contrôle et la manipulation de la constitution de "l'autre" à l'intérieure des limites de l'état néo-coloniale. Je démontre que depuis les premiers contacts avec les Européens, la conception de l'incapacité et du handicap des sociétés autochtones en Amérique du nord a été influence par une interpretation eurocentrique de "handicap" en tant qu'un manque de la capacité de production. Ceci a marginalizées les personnes handicapées, et de plus, fait partie d'un projet coloniale plus vaste, qui consiste à assigner des valeurs négatives à toutes formes de diversité et de différences, les marquant commes des déviations de la norme, et qui sont essentiellement presentées comme synonyme de "handicap". En même temps, les relations néo-coloniales d'oppression et de domination sont responsables de créées les conditions qui engendre l'incapacité et le handicap. Je propose que renouveller et recentrer les conceptions autochtones du handicap et de l'incapacité servivrait a soutenir les changements transfromateurs grâce à la puissance des relations respectueuses et interdépendantes.

Mots-clés: conception du monde autochtone; conception du monde eurocentrique; personalisme; universalisme; normalité; interdépendance

Colonialism and the Rupturing of Indigenous Worldviews

of Impairment and Relational Interdependence:

A Beginning Dialogue towards Reclamation and Social Transformation

With generous permission from Anishnaabe writer Vera Wabegijig, I open this paper

with an excerpt from her poem entitled *giinawind naaniibwiwag* (Wabegijig, 2011).

> we are standing
> clustered together on the land
> our legs firm
> as we stand
> together we dig our toes
> into the welcoming earth
> it nourishes us
> as we let our roots
> go deep to support
> all that we carry
> our roots spread out in every possible direction
> taking up as much space as it can
> and our roots stretch
> reaching for each other
> and as we touch
> we hold on
> we wrap ourselves
> we braid our roots
> so that we become one
> and this is how we stand

I present this verse not only because it reflects the nourishing connections to the land so

vital for our survival as human beings but also exemplifies the relational interdependence that is

naturally apart of our humanity and between all our relations. It is the recognition of this

universal interconnectedness, often dismissed and ignored within our families, communities and

larger society, that I feel will keep us strong in solidarity across differences and move us forward

toward transforming the structural and social injustices that exist in our world today. My

objective in this paper is to consider how Indigenous worldviews of relationality, governance and

interconnectedness can transform the ways in which we understand impairment and disability

justice issues. I write from my perspective as an Anishinabe woman whose ancestry is rooted in

the Algonquin First Nations community of Pikwàkanagàn, situated on the shores of the

Bonnechere River and Golden Lake in Renfrew County, Ontario.

Introduction

Impairment is a universal phenomenon, but it is interpreted differently in societies with

different cultural, political and economic structures. As the colonial invasion of what is now

labeled as North America took place, the construction of a Eurocentric notion of "disability" as

lack and deficiency was constructed and deployed to create a state of dependency or

disablement. This served as a means of justifying and supporting the colonization of the

Indigenous Nations of North America.

Across locations subjected to colonial rule, the Eurocentric understanding of disability

has served to justify the persistent inequality of disabled people. Erevelles (2011) explains that

the concept of disablement contributes to the colonial project as she contends that "'disability' is

a political and analytical category deployed by the colonialist state to patrol the boundaries of

citizenship" (p. 123). Following Erevelles, I contend that from the time of conquest to the

present, the imposition of the Eurocentric concept of disability upon Indigenous people has been

a tool to further the goals of colonialism in North America. Individuals or communities who did

not meet the colonizer's normative standards were deemed different, "primitive," and *Other*.

Thus, disability was intertwined with racial categorization as a means of delimiting and

maintaining difference. The Eurocentric model of disability conflates impairment and

"disability," assigning negative values to difference. I argue that in North American Indigenous

societies prior to European contact, impairment was doubtlessly present, but the process of

disablement through which impairment is reframed as unworthiness and diminished value as a

citizen was absent. Instead, Indigenous approaches to impairment were likely informed by

worldviews valuing difference and equality, and recognizing the fundamentality of

interdependence (Schelbert, 2003).

At the same time, impairment is produced by the relations of oppression, exploitation and

inequality that characterize colonial rule, as well as more recent neoliberal forms of rule.

Meekosha (2011) contends that the ideology of modern colonialism is central to the production

of impairment among Indigenous people in the Global South. She explains that impairment is a

"social product [of] modern imperial powers" (p. 669), resulting from the violence and war in

which Global North countries engage for the purpose of gaining control of territories and their

resources. Thus, the genesis of disablement and disability in the Global South is parallel to that

endured within North American Indigenous societies.

My discussion includes a synopsis of the Eurocentric worldview and how it contributes to

the meanings of difference and disability. I then discuss strategies of colonization in relationship

to the construction of disability as it is contrasted with the notion of normalcy, and how this

Eurocentric categorization was used to Other. Next, I consider Indigenous worldview

perspectives, particularly in relation to impairment and disability. I conclude with a discussion of

the radical potential of reclaiming Indigenous worldview perspectives.

Throughout this work, the term *Aboriginal* is used in the context of North America and

refers to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. The term *Indigenous* refers to the original

inhabitants of any land prior to colonialism. Today, there are over 370 million Indigenous people

around the world representing 4000 diverse cultures and languages (United Nations, n.d.).

Indigenous peoples around the world have been harmed by the legacies of colonialism and

exploitative global economic development, which has left many groups dispossessed from their

land base, marginalized and impoverished (United Nations, n.d.). *Colonialism* is defined as a

historical and ideological process, representing not only the conquest of one nation, its land and

resources over another, but also "the production of ideologies that justify the theft and violent

practices at its root" (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 275).

Worldviews Defined

Worldviews are the building blocks with which human cultures and societies are shaped.

They are paradigms that inform the values embedded within each society, and despite their

foundational nature, often go unnoticed. In his discussion of Aboriginal and Eurocentric

worldviews, Schelbert (2003) defines worldviews as structures that "lie buried behind the

textured forms like a skeleton composed of interrelated elements" (p. 62). Worldviews shape

every aspect of life, informing "efforts to secure sustenance, to maintain bonds between peoples,

to shape religious, technical, and artistic practice" (p. 61). Schelbert explains that "cradle

worldviews" (p. 62), the worldviews undergirding societies into which individuals are born, are

particularly difficult to perceive, and therefore are taken for granted, limiting the capability of the

individual and the collective to question them. As Aboriginal scholar Little Bear (2000) writes,

worldviews are "deep-rooted assumptions upon which attitudes are based" and are what allow

people to say "this is the way it is" (p. 83). As such, worldviews forms the basis for systems of

thought that claim truth and normativity (Schelbert, 2003).

Characteristics of the Eurocentric Worldview

The Eurocentric worldview has been imposed upon the Aboriginal communities of North

America from the time of European contact up to contemporary times. It has underpinned the

processes of colonization, and from the time of its imposition onward, it has influenced and

reshaped Aboriginal communities' understandings of impairment. To explain the impacts of this

worldview, I review its central characteristics. Indigenous scholars Battiste and Henderson

(2011) define Eurocentrism as a theory that upholds the notion of European superiority over non-

Europeans, placing Europe at the centre of invention, history and progress, constructing the

places and people outside of Europe as in opposition to it as marginal, and as "ahistorical,

stagnant, and unchanging" (p. 11). Further, a claim to universalism rooted in "true," monotheistic

religion is at the core of Eurocentric thought (Battiste & Henderson, 2011, p. 12; cf. Little Bear,

2000). This definition reflects the characteristics of the Eurocentric worldview that I will now

discuss: universalism, personalism and individualism, dualism and hierarchy, linearity, and

objectivity.

Universalism

As Little Bear (2000) explains, the Eurocentric worldview promotes the notion that there

is only "one true god, one true answer, one right way" (p. 82). Henderson (2000) describes

universality in Eurocentric thought as "a cognitive and cultural imperialism [that] articulates a

body of knowledge and values as the universal norm by which those in the periphery must live"

(p. 1). As such, those on the periphery who do not subscribe to such worldviews are seen as

primitive or savage and therefore different from the populace at the centre. The construction and

maintenance of differences, or the systematic categorization of the Other was crucial in order for

colonization to exist (Henderson, 2000). Smith (2012) argues that the systematic categorization

of the Other through the process of colonialism was integral to imperialism's development of an

imagined future nation that excluded Indigenous people. Therefore it can be assumed, as

Henderson (2000) points out, that "the universality of Civilization was not really sought since

there would no longer be justification to colonize" (p. 1). Conquest must occur in order to put

right the errant ways of the Other.

Dualism and Hierarchy

Little Bear (2000) writes that through its claims to objectivity, the Eurocentric worldview upholds a dualistic approach, an either/or scenario of "what is" (p. 82). One of the central features of Eurocentrism's dualism is the dichotomy it upholds between *nature* and *humans*. Within this worldview, nature is divided into distinct categories, each of which is ranked hierarchically. Schelbert (2003) describes this "threefold entity" as follows: At the lowest position is the inanimate world, including physical things like rocks or water as well as forces like the wind; next are living, "non-sentient" life, like bacteria and plants; and finally, sentient beings such as animals, which have "anima" but are thought to lack souls (p. 62). Against these categories and at the top of the hierarchy are humans, who are understood as uniquely rational and self-aware. Humans are regarded as transcendent over everything else in the world, holding divinely decreed power over all. The positioning of humans as superior within the Eurocentric worldview was used to further support racist, colonialist oppression, as Europeans questioned whether non-Europeans were more akin to non-human animals than "true humans" (Smith, 2012, p. 26) as they considered themselves. In the Eurocentric worldview, hierarchies among humans are also maintained along many dimensions, with Schelbert (2003) listing the following examples: "the have over the have-nots, men over women, the strong over the weak, the learned over the ignorant, the priesthood over the laity" (p. 63). I would suggest that this hierarchical order also positions the able-bodied over the disabled.

Linearity

Related to this is the notion of linearity, which involves the idea that history has a beginning and an end, and between these, there is an ongoing progression toward "perfection." As Little Bear (2000) writes, this way of thinking leads to what is "bigger, higher, newer, or

faster being preferred over smaller, lower, older, slower" (p. 82). When applied to social relations, this ideology results in the devaluation and exclusion of those who do not fit in to this narrative, such people with impairments and elderly people.

Personalism and Individualism

Another important characteristic of the Eurocentric worldview is its promotion of personalism, which concerns the understanding of God or "ultimate reality" (Schelbert, 2003, p. 63) as personal – and in this case – specifically as male. Gender hierarchies stem from this ideology, as does an emphasis on the absolute centrality of the individual. Just as groups of people are placed into a hierarchy in the Eurocentric worldview, so too are individuals ranked according to what is understood as their personal characteristics as well as the social roles they perform. This contributes to the development and maintenance of a class system (Little Bear, 2000), and diminishes opportunities to recognize the impacts of the structural and the relational in influencing people's social positions. Individuals whose characteristics and social roles are devalued are subjected to labeling and stereotyping, which supports discrimination. For instance, in the case of people with impairments, individualism renders disability as a personal tragedy, with the problems that people with impairments encounter understood as resulting directly from their impairment, as a deficient individual property. This prevents the development of an understanding of disability as resulting from unequal power relations.

Objectivity

In this the Eurocentric worldview, the only true knowledge is derived from "scientific" quantitative approaches, involving experimentation predicated on physical observation and measurement. Subjectivity is dismissed because it is not objectively measurable. Only what is material and can be quantified is deemed a valid basis for knowledge. Objectivity forms the

foundation for the medical model of disability, where impairment is objectified, quantified, and categorized. This has profound implications for disabled people, who are rendered as objects of medico-scientific inquiry (Tremain, 2001), their status as knowledge holders denied and their experiential knowledge dismissed.

These characteristics of Eurocentrism provided the justification for the colonization of Indigenous peoples, and enabled colonizers to ignore and discount the existence of diverse Indigenous worldviews. The suppression of Indigenous life and culture became the central feature of the colonizers' strategies towards the creation of a universal, Eurocentric civilization.

The Ideology of Normalcy in the Eurocentric Worldview

In the Eurocentric worldview difference is always constructed in opposition to the characteristics of normality. Davis (2010) discusses how the perception of disability as a problem is a result of the construction of normalcy rather than inherent characteristics of difference or impairment. He argues that the real "problem of disability" lies in the way that normalcy is constructed to create the "problem of the disabled person" (p. 7), explaining that despite perceptions to the contrary, the notion of normalcy stems not from human nature, but from social organization and ideologies.

The Eurocentric paradigm of normalcy is an artificial construct based on a positivist scientific approach, which categorizes certain desired and observable features as "averages" against which to measure one's social position, productivity, and citizenship. The development of the bell curve divided the population two groups: The standard, able-bodied and the non-standard disabled, with the assumption being that those who fell into the non-standard group required assistance to meet the norm (Davis, 2010). These distinctions became the basis by which to determine who was worthy of life and who was expendable, and, indeed, risked

contaminating the hegemonic body politic. Distinctions between *normal* and *abnormal* became a primary tool used by the colonizers in the production of the metaphor of degeneration taken up to promote Othering during colonization, as I will explain in the following section.

Impairment, Disability and Othering within Colonialism

Eurocentric ideologies justified the colonization of Indigenous peoples worldwide, enabling colonizers to discount diverse Indigenous worldviews and the ways of life they supported. The suppression of Indigenous life and culture became the central feature of the colonizers' strategies towards the creation of a universal, Eurocentric civilization. Persistent attempts at the eradication and replacement of Indigenous worldviews with Eurocentric thought and practices have left Indigenous people with contradictory and clashing worldviews. Little Bear (2000) explains that colonization in all its forms have left Indigenous people with a "consciousness that became a site of overlapping, contentious, fragmented competing desires and values" (p. 85). Consequently Indigenous people's ways of viewing difference, impairment, and disability have also become fragmented and tangled, fluctuating between colonial and pre-colonial perspectives on difference, impairment and disability.

At the same time, the Eurocentric worldview's conceptualization of impairment and disability as individual deficiency was incorporated into racist ideologies of Indigenous people's "inferiority" to justify domination; essentially, colonizers attributed disability to all Indigenous people, while upholding themselves as normal. Henderson (2000) points out this was part of the colonizers' efforts to construct stark distinctions between themselves and those they sought to subjugate. He states "the construction of absolute differences is important to delineate the boundary between the center and the periphery" (p. 1). As Meekosha (2006) explains, "disability collided with race … where difference in skin color and physiognomy became synonymous with

impairment" (p. 165). By conflating impairment, disability and race, and locating these statuses

on the negative end of a dichotomy, colonizers constructed Indigenous people as Other and

therefore as devalued.

Baynton (2001) explains the means by which ideologies of *normality* and *abnormality*

were deployed to facilitate the subjugation of Indigenous people during colonization. From its

inception, normality was "implicitly defined as that which advanced progress (or at least did not

impede it). Abnormality, conversely, was that which pulled humanity back toward its past,

toward its animal origins" (p. 35). Such beliefs were predicated on the concept of linearity and

the advancement of human civilization that animated the Eurocentric worldview. Given this,

individuals deemed abnormal were also conceptualized as "degenerate," representing a reversion

to earlier and less advanced stages of development. In this way, those considered abnormal posed

serious threats to the continued progression of civilization. From the very beginning of

colonization, stereotypes characterizing Indigenous people (as well as immigrants from places

outside of Western Europe) as "degenerate," cognitively and physically weak, and as carriers of

diseases have been used to justify and promote discrimination against Indigenous people and

immigrants in settler societies (Erevelles, 2011; Lovern, 2008; Meekosha, 2006), and have

served as a necessary foil for the construction of colonizers as oriented toward progress,

development and health.

By the early 19th century in North America, the eugenics movement lent "scientific"

support to the racist and ableist claims of colonizers, who sought to create racially "pure"

societies, under the guise of promoting population health and social progress. As Meekosha

(2006) explains, "disability became the rationale for eugenic policies that were destined to

become the mechanism for the exclusion of different races and religious and cultural groups

from the immigration process or, in the case of [I]ndigenous peoples, bred out" (p. 165).

"Breeding out" was not the only genocidal strategy taken up by colonizers with the objective of

destroying Aboriginal nations. Actions justified with reference to the "natural deficiency" of

Aboriginal societies, cultures, and families and their necessary eradication in the interest of

progress included the removal of children from their parents and their placement with White

families, contemporarily referred to as the "Sixties Scoop" (Hanson, 2009); residential school

policies; as well as widespread displacement from ancestral territories and containment upon

reservations. Smith (2012) explains that actions such as these were often "clothed within an

ideology of humanism and liberalism and the assertion of moral claims that related to the

concept of civilized 'man'" (p. 27). She argues that these actions comprised aspects of the

"dehumanizing imperatives" (p. 27) of colonialism, which in addition to their devastating

material impacts, also operated at the level of ideas, culture, and language, as my discussion of

the Eurocentric worldview shows.

The conferral of the devalued Eurocentric concept of disability upon Aboriginal and

Indigenous people has served to naturalize and deny the debilitating impacts of genocidal

policies, as well as to maintain the valorization of "normalcy" as an ableist and racist concept.

Through these Othering processes, a state of political, social and economic deprivation and

dependency among Indigenous societies has become entrenched.

Indigenous Worldviews

Although they have been forcibly suppressed by the Eurocentric worldview, Indigenous

worldviews are still present among Indigenous peoples the world over, and as more Indigenous

people reclaim our cultures and languages, these worldviews are experiencing a resurgence.

While there is great cultural diversity among Indigenous peoples, Indigenous worldviews share

in common a fundamental belief in the sacredness of relationships between people and the land

and the dynamic interdependence that is required for an egalitarian and just existence. Lovern

(2008) explains that the basis of Indigenous worldviews is "an understanding of the 'wholeness

of existence'" (p. 4). Little Bear (2000) notes that in the Indigenous worldview, everything is

"imbued with spirit and in constant motion" (p. 77). Thus, in the Eurocentric perspective,

Indigenous worldviews are non-dualistic, understanding nature and humanity as sharing a

common essence of spirit and movement. Battiste and Henderson (2011) describe the world

within Indigenous worldviews as a "dynamic, circular flux in which human beings participate

directly" (p. 14). This is in opposition to the Eurocentric worldview in which human beings exist

as a separate entity within a world viewed only as a backdrop to human existence. Because

Indigenous worldviews are non-dualistic, the holistic views that they uphold speaks to, as Little

Bear (2000) puts it, "the totality of creation, the group as opposed to the individual, the forest as

opposed to the individual trees" (p. 79). In Indigenous worldviews, truth is not considered a fixed

entity as it is within the static, objective, linear Eurocentric way of seeking knowledge and truth.

Cajete (2000) explains that in Indigenous worldviews, "truth is not a fixed point but rather an

ever evolving point of balance, perpetually created and perpetually new" (p. 19).

　　　Thus, from Indigenous worldviews, human variation and disability are not static,

unchangeable phenomena, but exist dynamically in balance with all relations. For instance, in a

research inquiry exploring meanings around disability within the Dine (Navajo) culture in the

southwestern United States, it was found that "harmony between the mind-body-spirit is

considered central to personal and family well-being. Disability within this paradigm is

attributed to disharmony within the universe" (Stienstra & Ashcroft, 2010, p. 194). Colonization

was and is the ultimate disruption of mind-body-spirit harmony, revealing a different

understanding of the cause of disability, in stark opposition to the victim-blaming stance of the

Eurocentric worldview construction of disability.

Four Characteristics Arising from Indigenous Worldviews in Relation to Impairment and Disability

The characteristics of Indigenous worldviews make their interpretations of difference,

impairment and disability radically different from the Eurocentric worldview. Here, I outline

four aspects of Indigenous worldviews that ground Indigenous understandings of disability and

difference: Language; sacredness and relatedness; interdependence; and difference without

dichotomy.

Language

Little Bear (2000) states that "language embodies the way a society thinks" (p. 78),

pointing out that European languages emphasize distinctions between categories and promote the

maintenance of dualistic hierarchies (black/white, saint/sinner animate/inanimate). Eurocentric

categorizations of humans mark distinctions between those considered "normal" and those

viewed as failing to meet the standard of normalcy, including disabled people. In contrast, prior

to colonization, the Eurocentric concept of "disability" did not exist within many Indigenous

languages. Lovern (2008) explains that "many Native languages do not have words or phrases

that translate words such as 'handicapped', 'crippled' or 'disabled' … Instead a person's

sameness within the community is what defines the individual" (p. 5). Thus, in many pre-contact

Indigenous societies, disability and difference could not be conceptualized along dualistic,

hierarchical lines. Little Bear (2000) notes that Aboriginal languages enable "the transcendence

of boundaries" (p. 78), explaining that everything in existence is animate. He writes, "If

everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my

relations" (p. 78).

An excerpt from Shackel's (2008) research with First Nations Cree communities in

Manitoba further supports the fact that the Eurocentric concept of disability did not exist within

the language and cultures of Indigenous peoples. Shackel writes, "In Cree the word

kakanaticichek means 'the gifted ones, the special people'" (p. 37; emphasis in original). He

quotes a Cree woman as explaining,

> There is no word in our language for disability, impairment or abnormality … The
> Creator put these people here for a purpose so that we will learn from them; they
> are our teachers. No one is considered abnormal in our culture (p. 37).

An Oji-Cree woman quoted in Shackel's (2008) work indicates "that the word for

disability on [sic] her language is a 'general term, never used to refer to another person'" (p. 38).

Instead, the word refers to a "generalized condition" (p. 38) that should be accepted, rather than

defined, classified or singled out for treatment. Similarly, Meelissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel,

Medicine Woman for the Mohegan Tribal nation of Connecticut suggests that "traditionally,

disability is not seen as such [because pre-colonial societies] had established means of caring for

and absorbing disability" (Senier & Barker, 2013, p. 126). Huhanna Hickey, a disabled Maori

activist notes that "Maori with disabilities were traditionally cared for by their whanau (extended

family)" (Senier & Barker, 2013, p. 126). Senier and Barker (2013) explain that in cases in

which traditional communities perceived impairments as distinct, they sometimes regarded

particular impairments as especially valuable; for instance, kāpo (blind) Maori were held in high

esteem, as were Navaho people who might now be labeled as autistic.

Sacredness and Relatedness

A second concept central to how difference and disability is perceived within Indigenous worldviews is found within the concept of the sacredness of relationships, which are understood as reciprocal and egalitarian. In the Eurocentric worldview, nature is an inanimate object to be subjugated by humans in accordance with divine decree. In Indigenous worldviews, all things are animate, imbued with spirit and equal. Schelbert (2003) explains that from Indigenous worldview perspectives, "there is no such entity as 'nature,' all forms of being are on a similar plane, are interdependent, are 'peoples' surely different, yet not hierarchically ordered as in the Middle-East derived cultural sense" (p. 68). Difference, although present, is not subjected to relationships of inequality since all relations are understood as interdependent and on the "same plane."

Schelbert (2003) describes the concept of sacredness as meaning "radical kinship and interdependence, an ongoing 'cosmic' give-and-take among beings large and small, creative and destructive, visible invisible … all operating on a spectral scale of mutuality rather than in a dualistic opposition" (p. 68). All beings are understood as "formations of sacred forces," and are seen as people:

> Four legged people, as two legged people, as crawling, swimming or winged people; as people that are green, or stony, or soft. Trees are called standing people and their bark or sap is collected for human use, are approached in a sense of ritually enhanced gratitude (p. 67).

All are people, all are equal, and all are relations: Little Bear (2000) explains that relations exist in "circle[s] of kinship" (p. 79) – interconnections within families, extended families, tribes, nations, and social organizations. These circles intersect and overlap in what Little Bear describes as the "'spider web' of relations" (p. 79).

Interdependence

For Indigenous peoples, an understanding of interdependence between all relations is a

central to existence in the world. The personalism and individualism that typifies the Eurocentric

worldview is absent from Indigenous worldviews, which instead emphasize interrelation

(Lovern, 2008). In contrast, in Western thought, independence is seen as a primary mode of

existence, as a positive and necessary attribute for worthiness as a person. This has serious

implications for people with disabilities. The disability rights movement in the Western world

supports the right of disabled people to be independent, as dependency is devalued and regarded

as an unworthy way of living. As Lovern (2008) points out, the Eurocentric worldview

valorization of independence "requires the individual to conquer or control the physical or

mental disability" (p. 2). Lovern contrasts this with Indigenous worldviews, in which the

"primary mode of existence is communal, involving 'all my relations' human, animal, plant,

spiritual and elemental" (p. 4).

Disability justice activist and theorist Mingus (2010) challenges the individualistic

emphasis on independence in the objectives of the disability rights movement. She suggests that

a disability justice approach that emphasizes collectivity and interdependence would be more

helpful, and more honest, writing "interdependence … embraces need and tells the truth: no one

does it on their own and the myth of independence is just that, a myth" (para. 8). In societies

shaped by Eurocentric worldviews, individuals perceived as lacking independence are

characterized as weak, and unproductive. Within such a prevailing paradigm, the Othering

phenomenon, then, becomes a central feature of control, of unequal power relations and an

enforced dependency. This dynamic is further entrenched through a moralistic "judgment of

[disabled people as] deserving the punishment of disability" (Lovern, 2008, p. 4). Disability is

located within the individual, and care for the individual is established as solely a responsibility

of the disabled person's immediate family (Lovern, 2008). Consequentially, the basis of the

exclusion and oppression of disabled people in political and social inequalities is hidden by the

personalistic and individualistic Eurocentric ideology.

Difference without Dichotomy

Lastly, the Eurocentric worldview concept of absolute difference, or the dichotomy of

normal/abnormal did not exist within Indigenous worldviews prior to colonization. Difference,

from Indigenous perspectives, is seen as matter of degrees of representation of the sacred forces

not of a person's true essence. Thus, the oppressive binaries of able-bodied/disabled,

normal/abnormal are absent here. Instead, degrees of difference are as sacred as all other

formations of sacred forces. Therefore, within Indigenous societies, difference is sacred, and

disability is sacred. Lovern (2008) writes,

> although an individual may be identified as having a mental of physical
> difference, the individual is not seen as 'Other' based on a disability … the value
> of the person is not lessened because of a physical or mental difference …
> difference only becomes one element not the defining element (p. 5).

This is in direct contrast to the negative meanings of difference and disability imposed on

individuals within the Eurocentric worldview, wherein difference and disability become the

defining features of the individual. As Mingus (2010) explains, disability is seen "as an

individual flaw or problem … lacking, sad and undesirable" (para. 1-2). Amongst Indigenous

worldviews, there is an understanding of the commonality of difference that enriches our

interconnectedness with all of our relations. Disability is a difference to celebrate, not a

shortcoming or a reason to exclude people from community.

Conclusion

The production of disability and disablement within Indigenous societies, from the time

of European contact to the present day, has its roots within the power relations of colonization.

The Eurocentric construct of difference and disability did not exist in pre-colonial times

primarily due to an Indigenous worldview that promoted an interdependent and egalitarian

society where relations with all peoples were considered sacred. The forced imposition of the

Eurocentric construction of disability functioned as a justification for the oppressive legacies of

colonization historically and in contemporary times. Loss of language, culture, and dispossession

from the land base has left soul wounds within the minds, spirit, and bodies of Indigenous

peoples as well as within whole communities, soul wounds that continue to be felt from one

generation to the next. The well-publicized problems in Attawapiskat, for instance, are only one

example of the exclusion and oppression facing Aboriginal people in Canada today. Gross

inequities persist between Indigenous people and settlers, which perpetuate the legacy of

colonialism and disablement among Aboriginal peoples and our communities today.

   Acculturation has caused what Little Bear (2000) describes as "fragmented and often

colliding worldviews" (p. 85), leaving Indigenous people susceptible to the continuing

imposition of the Eurocentric worldviews of disability and disablement. Smith (2012) notes that

for Indigenous people, knowing our history is part of the "critical pedagogy of decolonization"

(p. 36). Dialogue around the meaning of disability within Indigenous societies is vital, not only

for the reclaiming and renewal of Indigenous worldviews related to difference and disability but

also to learn how alternate worldviews may teach and reveal for us more diverse ways of

approaching disability beyond the prevailing Eurocentric worldview.

   We must, as Meekosha (2011) notes, "acknowledge that there are many ways of

describing and understanding disability and impairment … and to recognize that some discourses

are privileged and others excluded in disability studies" (p. 678). Taking up Indigenous

worldview perspectives in critical disability studies can provide an opportunity to fully explore

constructed concepts from outside the boundaries of the Eurocentric worldview, which may lead

to the development of new research paradigms and pedagogy within the field. As Erevelles

(2010) writes, "Invisibility is costly. Recognition, on the other hand, can inspire action" (p. 131).

I believe that recognizing disability from Indigenous worldviews can promote transformational

change in our society.

      I return to Vera Wabegijig's poem, *giinawind naaniibwiwag*, here presented in its

entirety, to further our consideration of the connections between people and the land, the

centrality of interdependence, and the radically transformative potential of thinking from

Indigenous worldviews.

> *giinawind naaniibwiwag*
>
> we are standing
> clustered together on the land
> our arms reach up to the sky
> from open hands
> life springs
>
> giinawind naaniibwiwag
> we are standing
> clustered together on the land
> our legs firm
> as we stand
> together we dig our toes
> into the welcoming earth
> it nourishes us
> as we let our roots
> go deep to support
> all that we carry
> our roots spread out in every possible direction
> taking up as much space as it can
> and our roots stretch
> reaching for each other
> and as we touch
> we hold on
> we wrap ourselves
> we braid our roots
> so that we become one

and this is how we stand

giinawind naaniibwiwag
we are standing
clustered together on the land
we are the trees
we will not fall
"our roots are dug deep
deep in the soul of our mother"
and at the core of our being
in that stillness
our breath
our words
our songs
are one.

Acknowledgements

References

Battiste, M., & Henderson, S. (2011). Eurocentrism and the European ethnographic tradition. In

M. J. Cannon & L. Sunseri (Eds.), *Racism, colonialism, and indigeneity in Canada: A*

reader (pp. 11-19). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Baynton, D. (2001). Disability and the justification of inequality in American history. In P. K.

Longmore & L. Umansky (Eds.), *The new disability history: American perspectives* (pp.

33-57). New York, NY: New York University Press.

Cajete, G. (2000). *Native science: Natural laws of interdependence*. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light

Publishers.

Cannon, M., & Sunseri, L. (2011). *Racism, colonialism, and indigeneity in Canada: A reader*.

Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Davis, L. J. (2010). Constructing normalcy. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (3rd

ed., pp. 3-19). New York, NY: Routledge.

Erevelles, N. (2011). The color of violence: Reflections on race, gender and disability. In K. Q.

Hall (Ed.), *Feminist disability studies* (pp. 117-135). Bloomington, IN: Indiana

University Press.

Hanson, E. (2009). *The sixties scoop & Aboriginal child welfare*. Prepared for the First Nations

Studies Program, The University of British Columbia. Retrieved from

http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/sixties-

scoop.html?type=123

Henderson, J. S. Y. (2000). Post-colonial ghost dancing: Diagnosing European colonialism. In

M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (pp. 57-76). Vancouver, BC:

UBC Press.

Little Bear, L. (2000). Jagged worldviews colliding. In M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (pp. 77-85)*.* Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Lovern, L. (2008). Native American worldview and the discourse on disability. *Essays in Philosophy, 9*(1), 1-8. Retrieved from http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/vol9/iss1/14/

Meekosha, H. (2006). What the hell are you? An intercategorical analysis of race, ethnicity, gender and disability in the Australian body politic. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 8*(2-3), 161-176. doi:10.1080/15017410600831309

Meekosha, H. (2011). Decolonising disability: Thinking and acting globally, *Disability & Society, 26*(6), 667-682. doi:10.1080/09687599.2011.602860

Mingus, M. (2010, November). Changing the framework: Disability justice: How whole communities can move beyond access to wholeness. *Resist Newsletter*. Retrieved from https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/

Senier, S., & Barker, C. (2013). Introduction. *Journal of Literacy & Cultural Disability Studies, 7*(2), 123-140. doi:10.1353/jlc.2013.0013

Shackel, D. W. (2008). *The experience of First Nations people with disabilities and their families in receiving services and supports in First Nations communities in Manitoba - Honouring the stories* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses. (Order No. MR41468)

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Zed Books.

Schelbert, L. (2003). Pathways of human understanding: An inquiry into western and North

American Indian worldview structures. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 27*(1), 61-75.

Stienstra, D., & Ashcroft, T. (2010). Voyaging on the seas of spirit: An ongoing journey towards understanding disability and humanity. *Disability and Society, 25*(2), 191-203. doi:10.1080/09687590903534411

Tremain, S. (2001). On the government of disability. *Social Theory and Practice, 27*(4), 617-636.

United Nations. (n.d.). *Who are Indigenous peoples* [Fact sheet]. Prepared by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf

Wabegijig, V. (2011, September 20). giinawind naaniibwiwag. In *Wild Rice Dreams.* Retrieved from http://verawaabegeeshig.wordpress.com/2011/09/20/i-see-us-solidarity-poem/