How do service providers define cultural safety when working with Indigenous families of autistic children?

Vanessa C. Fong[1], Janet McLaughlin[1], & Margaret Schneider[2]

1. Wilfrid Laurier University, Department of Health Studies.
2. Wilfrid Laurier University, Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education.

Background

Section 35 of Canada's Constitution recognizes three distinct Indigenous groups—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—who currently make up 1.8 million people, or approximately 5% of Canada's population (Statistics Canada, 2022). Previous research has demonstrated that Indigenous families face compounded barriers when accessing autism services and supports in Canada. One barrier that has been identified is a lack of culturally safe services, however there remains a gap in understanding how service providers define and practice cultural safety in their work.

Methods

Twelve service providers (e.g., developmental pediatricians, social workers) were interviewed.

A minimum of one year of experience (average: 9.2 years) working with Indigenous families of autistic children in Ontario.

Interviews (average length: 45 minutes) were transcribed and coded. Data analysis involved using a thematic approach.

Objectives

The goal of this research was to explore how service providers define and conceptualize cultural safety in the context of working with Indigenous families of autistic children.

Community Engagement

Conclusions

The findings have important implications for policy and practice by emphasizing the need for service providers to understand Indigenous Peoples' history, address biases through self-reflection, and practice humility when building relationships with families.

Results

1. Understanding the History

Service providers dealing with Indigenous communities need to understand that not only are we unique community by community, but they all have different cultures, traditions, ceremonies, and language. The mainstream population that offers us our services doesn't understand all of those things, it's a lot deeper than just cultural sensitivity training.

2. Self-Awareness and Reflexivity

Cultural safety would be recognizing that inherently in your interaction with a patient that is Indigenous there's a power dynamic just by you being in a position as a therapist or physician. So how do we facilitate an even playing field? A culturally safe system would be responsive to the needs of a family and get a flattening of the hierarchy that might exist in that relationship.

Cultural Safety

3. Prioritizing the Relationship

It involves really setting our agenda aside. We wanna start services right away but some families might not be ready for that and that's okay. If what they're comfortable with right now is just meeting with me to talk about what I can do and that's it for now, that will be OK. We need to start really just taking the time to let the people we work with, or to let the families really take the lead. What we think might be a goal, might not be a goal for the family.

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Contact info:
Dr. Vanessa Fong
vfong@wlu.ca