

AN INQUIRY TO PIIKANI CULTURE AND THE OLD AGENCY ON THE TETON

By

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**APPROVAL PAGE**

This scholarly project, authored by Samuel Hilger in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctorate of Occupational Therapy Degree at Rocky Mountain College, has been thoroughly reviewed by the Faculty Advisor overseeing this work. The project is hereby formally approved, attesting to its adherence to the academic standards and criteria established by the accrediting body and institution.

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Dr. Twylla Kirchen, OTR/L, PhD

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Date

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12/9/24

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** I am a fifth generation Montanan who had little knowledge about indigenous cultures in general, and my family in particular. This project was an opportunity for me to delve into both of these topics. One of the original headquarters for the Blackfeet reservation, the old agency on the Teton, is privatized and owned by my family since the mid 1900's. My grandfather told my mother and me that we were descendants of Blackfeet people my entire life, and then my sister had a DNA test done that proved this was false. Neither my mom nor I know why he believed this claim.

**Purpose:** This project aimed to improve my knowledge about my family, the Piikani/ Blackfeet culture, and to educate rural Montanans about occupational therapy (OT).

**Methodology:** A literature review was completed and then through collaboration with professors Nordeck, Carroll, and Kirchen, the reflexivity Model (Carroll et al., 2022) was used to consider personal, cultural, and societal components. This paired with Petrone's et al.(2021) adolescent research strategies allowed for a meaningful project experience and the opportunity to engage with Piikani people.

**Outcomes:** This project's outcomes include the development of relationships with people, place, program development, grant proposals, and new insight on my family, society, and the Piikani culture.

**Summary:** My literature review was aimed to gain insight on Indigenous communities within Montana, specifically the Piikani people. After completing my literature review and collaborating with professors I was able to partner with Rocky Mountain College's Native American Outreach department and found a mentorship with Nick Rink on the Blackfeet Indian

Reservation in Montana. I spent from 8/28/2024 to 11/13/2024 promoting OT within the Browning Public Schools.

## Section I

### Literature Review

#### **Theme A: Montana Tribes and Reservations**

Montana has a population just over 1.1 million, and roughly 70,000 of these people have an Indigenous bloodline (United States Census Bureau, 2022a). Most of the Indigenous population in Montana live on reservation land (Montana Office of Public Instruction, n.d.), however only 13% of Indigenous people live on reservations in all of the U.S. (United States Census Bureau, 2021b). Indigenous communities on reservations have the highest census undercount of any population (United States Census Bureau, 2022c).

There are seven Indigenous reservations within Montana and 12 federally recognized tribes, each with a unique culture and history (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2019). All except one tribe in Montana has a reservation. The reason the Little Shell Chippewa are without a reservation is because they weren't federally recognized until 2019; they are still pursuing land acquisition (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2019). The other 11 federally recognized tribes are the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, Kootenai, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Plains Cree, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Crow. The seven reservations in Montana are the Blackfeet, Rocky Boy's, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Flathead, Fort Peck, and Fort Belknap. The last three reservations mentioned are shared by more than one tribe (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2019)

#### ***Blackfeet Reservation***



The Blackfeet reservation is in Northwest Montana and is butted up against the east side of the great continental divide and the 49th parallel. The reservation encompasses close to 1.5 million acres of land (Montana Office of Public Instruction. n.d.). The population is roughly 10,706, and 8,600 of these people identify as Indigenous (United States Census Bureau, 2021a). Browning is the largest community within the Blackfeet reservation, and it has a population of approximately 5,611 (United States Census Bureau, 2022b). The Blackfeet's original reservation was created in 1873 by an executive order, and it was named the Great Northern Reservation. It was designated to the Blackfeet as well as three other tribes. Years later, in 1887, the reservation was split into three smaller reservations, the Blackfeet, Fort Peck, and Fort Belknap, and the tribes ceded 17.5 million acres to the U.S. In 1895, the Blackfeet ceded close to a million more acres of land to the U.S., and this became Glacier National Park in 1910 after U.S. mining operations proved unsuccessful (Hagen-Dillion, 2018).

Blackfeet Tribal Health (2017) completed a community health assessment, highlighting several health concerns and disparities, and they stated substance abuse was the community's top priority. Approximately 50% of mothers delivering babies in a hospital tested positive for illicit drugs (Blackfeet Tribal Health Department, 2017). The most prevalent drugs on the reservation include meth, opioids, and alcohol. Another key takeaway of the assessment was that 33% of 8th graders reported attempting suicide and lacked access to care. The study noted that 31% of residents claimed to use traditional healers and medicine (Blackfeet Tribal Health Department, 2017). Most residents claimed they didn't engage in traditional medicine because they did not know where they receive it (Blackfeet Tribal Health Department, 2017). Residents with higher levels of tribal engagement displayed greater resilience to the impact of adverse childhood

experiences (John-Henderson et al., 2019). Understanding the accessibility and influence tribal engagement has on residents' health and well-being is vital.

### **Theme B: Addressing Health Disparities Among Americas Indigenous Communities**

Indigenous communities have faced significant healthcare disparities since their colonization. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these disparities, adding to health challenges that have affected this population throughout history (Belanger et al., 2020; Thakur et al., 2020). According to BlueBird Jernigan et al., (2020), the working and living condition of American Indigenous communities, among other minorities, predisposes them to worse health outcomes. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Van et al., (2020) showed that Indigenous communities already faced higher levels of chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease, making them more vulnerable during the pandemic. In a study by Belanger et al., (2020), Indigenous communities were among the minorities facing a higher burden of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and fatalities. Belanger et al., (2020) adds that such disparities were evident in other countries where underserved populations had difficulty accessing education, healthcare, social services, and affordable healthy food. The community's health disparities make them more vulnerable to other diseases and health issues, causing them to have a compounding effect. There is a need for OTs and other stakeholders to adopt effective strategies to address health inequities within this disadvantaged community.

### **Theme C: Culturally Relevant Approaches in Occupational Therapy**

Culturally relevant practice provides more opportunities for addressing health disparities among Indigenous communities. Isaac et al., (2018) found that integrating knowledge about traditions and culture in care offers a chance to develop accurate Indigenous Health Indicators

that can help communities effectively define and prevent health risks. Tai et al., (2021) describes that healthcare professionals should engage with the Indigenous communities in their cultural contexts in order to reduce health inequities affecting them. Additionally, Garcia and Garcia (2021) suggested the importance of cultural competence in occupational therapy to improve the growth of minority groups and increase access to quality care. Casimir (2023) found that integration of cultural values, conveyance of cultural respect, and utilization of community outreach events significantly enhanced the development and implementation of occupational therapy programs in Indigenous communities. Likewise, Pham et al., (2022) found that adopting traditional spiritual programs to address mental health challenges among Indigenous communities increased spiritual and psychological well-being, cultural knowledge, and culminated in community benefit. Indigenous communities also have minimal access to occupational therapists in the community.

Chakraverty (2022) found that epistemic incongruities and marginalization contribute to Indigenous community's low rates of STEM field engagement and high rates of imposter syndrome. Lacking professionals with a thorough understanding of the community's cultural and spiritual practices escalates cultural challenges, which reduces the effectiveness of occupational therapy programs to address health needs within the community. Further, Heisler and Safranski (2018) found that mental health programs targeting Indigenous communities must be culturally relevant to be effective. There is a need for occupational therapists to be aware of the cultural and spiritual practices of Indigenous communities to provide client-centered care. Occupational therapists should engage with community members and adopt existing community practices to add to their intervention strategies for addressing health challenges with this population.

## **Theme D: Importance of Reflexivity in OT**

Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of reflexivity practice as a practical strategy for addressing health disparities among disadvantaged communities, there is ambiguity in the process and definitions. Carroll et al., (2022) developed the reflexivity model to improve future OTs personal, cultural, and structural reflexive practices, and subsequently clinical skills.

Dawson et al., (2022) highlights reflexivity as a vital skill for engaging in safe cultural practice when dealing with Indigenous communities. Walder et al., (2022) shows that reflexivity enables OTs to discover their professional identity, which ultimately helps them to improve their practice. In addition, Walder et al., (2022) highlighted the importance of reflexivity in embracing the patient's culture and enhancing culturally sensitive care. Despite the increasing recognition of reflexivity, more research must be done on its integration into practice. According to Dawson et al., (2022), reflexivity is crucial in addressing health inequity. It critically reflects on the social conditions and contributing factors to reducing health disparities. Beagan (2018) argues that cultural reflexivity enables individuals to take responsibility for their privileges and reflect on their practices, allowing them to enhance their quality of care.

Reflexivity reveals the importance of self-awareness in enhancing occupational therapy practice and reducing health inequities in underserved populations. It allows professionals to understand their identity as well as place themselves in the contexts of underserved populations. There is a need for increased integration of reflexivity in occupational therapy practice to enhance the provision of therapeutic services that will address occupational inequities among Indigenous communities.

### **Problem Statement**

The reflexive processes of healthcare providers working on reservations in Montana is not well understood. Extreme health disparities and ineffective interventions will be perpetuated without understanding how healthcare, reflexivity, and indigeneity intersect. This study advocates for improved understanding and application of reflexivity to address Indigenous health disparities.

## **Section II**

### **Methodology**

#### ***Project Planning***

The promotion of OT in Browning was decided to be the focal point of this capstone project. To prepare, the Reflexivity model (Carroll et al., 2022) was utilized with the assistance of Dr. Carroll, Dr. Kirchen, and Dr. Nordeck. This model aims to consider societal, cultural, and personal factors. Dr. Kirchen helped me acquire a level one International Traditional Games Society certification, as well as funded the acquisition of the sensory profile 2, both of which were utilized during the project. To develop skills with the indigenous games I also attended an International Games Society seminar as an instructor at a school on the Crow reservation in the summer of 2024, I taught run and scream which was a traditional Piikani game. Finally, Dr. Kirchen had a personal Piikani contact that she introduced me to that provided much insight and her approval to complete the project. When deciding where would best be a setting to promote OT the most common settings for OT's were considered, which are hospitals, private clinics, and schools (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). I reached out to these Piikani organizations, and the school system agreed to let me discuss OT with staff and students, which also granted me the opportunity to learn from them about the Piikani culture and create shared lived experiences. I was not able to schedule a meeting with the Browning hospital to discuss my project, and there

were no private practice OT clinics in the community to collaborate with. I did reach out to the closest traveling OT that worked at hospitals near the reservation, however they declined to participate.

### ***Old Agency on The Teton***

The old agency on the Teton was created for the U.S. government to monitor and restrict the existence of Piikani people as well as distribute goods including blankets, knives, needles, thread and tobacco. There are reports from government employees that the items disbursed were often of poor quality or never given to the Piikani people (Thornton, 2018). The agency on the Teton was in operation from 1861-1876, until the reservation was reduced in size and moved North. It was the second Blackfeet agency, with the first being in Fort Benton, and created in 1855 (Thornton, 2018). Currently the old Agency on the Teton is utilized for agricultural production of hay and cattle. Large stones have been placed to mark where the Agency headquarters once stood, and other buildings such as a Dr.'s office, blacksmith area, store, school, and housing for government employees. Most of the government workers at the Agency were farmers, hired to assimilate the Piikani into colonial settler style agriculturalist. In 1869, the U.S. government began its first agricultural experiments at the Agency, and in 1872 the first public school for Piikani people was opened. Just next to the Agency headquarters is a graveyard distinguished by depressions in the ground and uniquely bright vegetation, there are ~30 Piikani burial sights here, one of which is believed to be Chief Mountain's. Reports from the current resident of the old Agency state that people don't often visit the old Agency, and in the last two decades they estimate that only 10 people have asked to engage with the Old Agency for historical or cultural purposes. John Wood one of the agents wrote "Many of the Piegan tribe dread this place on account of the misfortunes that have attended their presence here during the

past few years through the introduction of liquor and contact with immoral, conscienceless, desperate whiskey traders. They point to the graves of their chiefs with tears in their eyes and beg to be removed to a place of safety.” (Thornton, 2018), which may offer some explanation of the minimized engagement. In 2000, the University of Montana completed a shovel test at the site of the old Agency and determined that the land where the the old Agency was headquartered has never been cultivated making it an attractive archaeological site. The University then offered to purchase the land because of this, however the landowners declined. To promote education in regard to the site and its history, a proposed field trip was discussed with Browning Public School staff and could take place in the future.

### ***Browning Public Schools***

Although the reflexive model (Carroll et al., 2022) was utilized in preparation for this project, upon arrival to Browning, Nick stated that his biggest need from me was to build relationships with the staff and students. He offered clarification on what he meant by this through discussing the importance of reciprocity and respect, as well as offering me a relationship with him and demonstrating these qualities. Also, Nick shared several articles and books relating to Piikani culture, one in particular, Petrone et al., (2021) discussed the need for a shift in pedagogical and research approaches within Indigenous communities. This article helped reduce the pressure of producing statistics through completing standardized tests and surveys that I had compiled and created prior to collaborating with any of the possible participants, and instead focused on building as many meaningful relationships with community as I could. I was able to engage in field trips, assemblies, classes, community supper programs, staff wellness day, parades, basketball, skateboarding, weightlifting, hikes, riflery, and so much more while

completing my project on the Blackfeet reservation, I even voted for the first time while living in Browning.

### **Section III**

#### **Outcomes**

##### ***Sustainability Plan***

A Browning Public School teacher discussed with me his desire to implement virtual reality into the community with the purpose of increasing access to trades skill development and exposure. He had already spoken with the company Interplay, who specializes in virtual trades training. Together we completed two demos utilizing Interplay's interactive software and met with a sales representative to discuss feasibility and price. The Interplay employee was extremely helpful in providing open grants that would cover the cost of implementing access to roughly 30-50 participants a year, and even offered assistance in drafting the grant applications. Currently, the Browning teacher and I are still researching other potential partners for this, and our goal is to have a program utilizing virtual training by the start of the final quarter of this school year that is completely free to the users and addresses relevant labor needs of the community.

##### ***Conclusion***

Indigenous communities have faced significant health disparities since colonialization of the United States. Occupational therapy has a unique opportunity to help some of these inequities. However, there is insufficient research on the effectiveness of occupational therapy practices in addressing the challenges of this underserved population. The literature review revealed the complex relationship between Montana and its reservations, the distinct needs of the Blackfeet reservation, the importance of reflexivity in OT practice, and the need for providing



culturally appropriate interventions in OT to address health disparities in Indigenous communities.

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