Shifting our Gaze: Thinking Critically about ‘Culture’

Alison J Gerlach

Alison J Gerlach, PhD, MSc (OT), Postdoctoral Fellow. National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George B.C. V2N 4Z9 Canada. Alison.gerlach@alumni.ubc.ca

Acknowledgement
I am extremely grateful to Dr. Rebecca Aldrich at Saint Louis University in the United States and Dr. Karen Whalley Hammell at the University of British Columbia in Canada for their insightful feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

Key Words: critical perspectives, cultural safety, health equity, occupational therapy, postcolonial perspectives, reflexivity, social transformation.

Abstract
The complexity of ‘culture’ and its expression in occupational therapy practice and education continues to be explored and debated extensively within our profession. A pervasive feature of this discourse is the notion of cultural competency as an ideology and approach that is aligned with multiculturalism. This paper critically examines and problematizes the culturalist assumptions that underpin the predominant way in which culture continues to be conceptualized and enacted in occupational therapy. This analysis draws attention to the inherent risks of engaging in uncritical theorizing on issues of culture and diversity and to the ideological processes of ‘Othering’ and racialization that underlie culturalist perspectives. The concept of cultural safety is introduced as an alternative critical analytical lens that brings postcolonial theorizing into the practical realm of occupational therapy practice and education. This lens shifts our gaze away from cultural differences and directs our attention to the socio-political and historical contexts of peoples’ health and healthcare experiences. This paper concludes that cultural safety is consistent with growing calls within our profession to engage with critical perspectives on issues related to culture, diversity, and injustice in order to advance socially transformative and responsive forms of occupational therapy practice and education.