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The Intersectionality of Indigenous and Neurodivergent Identities in American Indian Education

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Abstract

Neurodivergent and Indigenous identities are often intertwined with both facing difficulties because of Euro-centric views that came with colonialization. As much of Indigenous people's ways of being—such as their culture, traditions, language and spirituality—have been eradicated, there is a lack of research and understanding on Indigenous individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities. The purpose of this research is to look at Indigenous perspectives on neurodiversity with the aims of increasing awareness of these voices. This research asks, how has the intersectionality of Indigenous and neurodivergent identities been misunderstood and neglected by American society? It is important for us to understand Indigenous terminology related to neurodiversity, along with the current limitations of research on their perspectives and difficulties acknowledging intersectionality. To address these limitations, this paper utilizes Indigenous methodology and draws on peer-reviewed scholarship. Even though we have a long way to go, we must continue to improve awareness of neurodiversity with Indigenous communities.

Keywords: neurodiversity, indigeneity, colonialization, intersectionality, education

The Intersectionality of Indigenous and Neurodivergent Identities in American Indian Education

How has the intersectionality of Indigenous and neurodivergent identities been misunderstood and neglected by American society? The expectations of a Eurocentric education system impose conformity on both communities. As someone who has grown up and been diagnosed with autism and attention-deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), I know first-hand the experiences that many individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities have. I'm someone who has many special interests, hyper fixations and a high sense of morals of what is right or wrong. All are related to my condition and beneficially shaped me into a person that I am proud of today. However, as someone who is Caucasian, I further recognize that much of the diagnosis of neurodevelopmental disabilities reflects the Western medical model. Much of Western medication stems from Eurocentric views that have justified not just colonization in the past, but the need to "fix" people in current medical practice. Yet, being neurodivergent has ousted me from society since I experience the world differently.

Indigenous traditions, spirituality, language and culture have experienced eradication efforts since European settlers arrived (Bill, n.d.; LaFrance, 1978). Much of our society's views on neurodiversity and Indigeneity are similar. Like neurodivergent individuals, Indigenous peoples have been viewed with that same Western, Euro-centric mindset since colonialization, which has continued to affect them to this day. Caucasian children and adults are typically researched, discussed and diagnosed more often than Indigenous people. Even though we have that medical benefit, much of what follows us after diagnosis is exclusion from society and persistent ignorance of our need to

survive. The colonialization of Indigeneity heavily mirrors those with neurodevelopmental disabilities, which further intersects when Indigenous individuals themselves are diagnosed (AutismBC, 2023; Busch & Thomson, 2024; Ineese-Nash, 2020; Mitchelson & Livock, 2023). The evidence shows that Western colonialization on Indigenous communities has affected the Indigenous and Western understanding of how intersected they truly are.

My research utilizes Indigenous methodology, which is an approach based on the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. Following the literature review, the paper presents four analytical sections. The first section details the history of colonialization on Indigenous communities within education and how their voices are still being silenced today. The second section discusses the overall view that Indigenous communities have on the topic of neurodevelopmental disabilities and the Western Euro-centric medical mindset. The third section focuses on the difficulties of acknowledging individuals who are both Indigenous and neurodivergent. The last section discusses the limitations of research on the intersectionality of Indigeneity and neurodiversity. The conclusion summarizes the literature review and four sections while reflecting on how this research can be used.

Literature Review

Though there are many marginalized communities nationwide, one that is typically the subject of debate is people with neurodevelopmental disabilities. Busch and Thomson (2024) mention that such disabilities often include autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). As someone who is neurodivergent, from childhood I've been subjected to being outcasted by my peers for being different. This is

a similar experience that many Indigenous individuals have faced since colonialization, as noted by Simpson (2021), Ineese-Nash (2020) and Bruno et al. (2025). While neurodivergence has consistently been judged with the Western, Euro-centric ableist views within society, the same can be stated of Indigenous communities. When both intersect with one another, it is unfortunate to realize how many of these individuals are overlooked and/or rejected.

This literature review will take a thoughtful look at the varying experiences relating to individuals who are both Indigenous and neurodivergent in relation to Indigenous education. The goal of this research is to increase awareness of the more marginalized identities within Indigenous communities and how colonialization has continued to silence these experiences. All these sources integrated the diverse perspectives of Indigenous individuals who live with neurodevelopmental disabilities and addresses eradication of both of their intersecting identities has affected their way of life.

An Indigenous Perspective on Neurodivergent Individuals

Various research has indicated that within Indigenous communities, their overall view and perspective on neurodevelopmental disabilities differs starkly from that of Western Euro-centric views. Considering there isn't an Indigenous word for disability, (AutismBC, 2023; Bruno et al., 2025), it is worth noting that many communities don't refer to neurodivergence as a condition within a binary mindset. In contrast to the medical mindset of Western science, Indigenous communities view those with neurodevelopmental disabilities, whether that is autism or ADHD, as people who were granted with gifts. Regardless of their differences, everyone is the same in their

community; no one is above or below (AutismBC, 2023; Bruno et al., 2025; Mitchelson & Livock, 2023; Nair et al., 2024; Simpson, 2021). It is all about retaining a reciprocal relationship within their communities and an understanding of a spiritual/cultural mindset in accepting disabilities.

Difficulties Acknowledging Indigenous Experiences with Neurodiversity

As most neurodivergent research and recorded experiences are heavily based in Western and Euro-centric views, there is an overwhelming lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous Peoples with neurodevelopmental disabilities. As many Indigenous individuals have experienced violations of their human rights since colonialization, there is understandably much concern from individuals about institutional diagnosis. Many experiences of Indigenous and neurodivergent individuals have indicated that diagnoses have resulted in children being taken away from their families, as well as a lack of program support for disabled individuals (AutismBC, 2023; Busch & Thomson, 2024; Ineese-Nash, 2020; Mitchelson & Livock, 2023).

Also worth noting is that research indicates possible solutions lie not only in assisting in decolonization efforts for Indigenous communities but the inclusive efforts for neurodivergent and disabled members as well (AutismBC, 2023; Busch & Thomson, 2024; Mitchelson & Livock, 2023). Non-profit organizations that acknowledge not just the neurodivergent experience but also promote the inclusion of Indigenous experiences and acceptance of different mindsets are integral to such improvements. Importantly, strategic essentialism, which is used to empower and unify marginalized groups of people, should be used to work on reclaiming the narratives on Indigenous peoples (Ellis, 2023).

Limitations of Research on Neurodivergent Indigenous Experiences

Even though there is an immense amount of general research on neurodevelopmental disabilities, there is a limited amount of research on neurodivergent Indigenous experiences. It is further worth noting that most of the research on Indigenous neurodivergence comes from outside of the United States, such as in Canada, Australia or Aotearoa/New Zealand, with little research produced in the United States on Indigenous experiences. One of the most significant challenges to further research is ultimately related to the eradication of historical Indigenous identities, whether that has been through residential boarding schools or genocide, but also the fact that having a neurodivergent identity continues to push individuals into the outgroup of society (AutismBC, 2023; Bruno et al., 2025; Ineese-Nash, 2020; Mitchelson & Livock, 2023; Simpson, 2021). Most of the mainstream understanding of neurodivergent disabilities is based on Western medical models, such as labeling autism as a condition that needs to be fixed. This contrasts strongly with how Indigenous individuals view neurodivergent disabilities (Ellis, 2023; Nair et al., 2024; Simpson, 2021). The intersectionality of both Indigenous and neurodivergence experiences, therefore, requires more research especially in the United States, given the difficulty of finding perspectives on what it was like to be in both worlds, to live with each identity.

For us to bring greater awareness of neurodiversity within Indigenous communities, we must understand the spiritual/cultural mindset of neurodiversity within these communities, that are rooted in colonialization that have all but eradicated the interconnected voices of Indigenous and neurodivergent identities.

History of Colonialization in American Indian Education

Though settler colonialization began as soon as Westerners entered tribal territory in North America, these efforts were cemented through a variety of formalized and institutional means, such as residential boarding schools. Dr. Willard E. Bill (n.d.) of the Muckleshoot Reservation describes the experiences of Indigenous children taken from their homes to be schooled in Western culture, noting that much of the initial instructional approach in 19th century Native American Education was used as memorization of the Bible as a textbook. This in turn has affected our perspective on Indigenous communities, with much of what we have learned having been from the perspective of colonizers; such narratives have resulted in generational trauma still experienced by Indigenous individuals to this day. As noted by Joan LaFrance (1978), a Chippewa member, Indigenous history “cannot be found in your history books” (p. 2).

This is a common experience regardless of tribal identity, and it continues to play a role in the relationship Indigenous communities have with post-secondary education. Alyjah Neil and Blake McLeod, who are non-binary, queer and Indigenous, express in the video *Academia for the Indigiqueer: Love Letters & Survival Lessons* that, aside from frustrations that come from post-secondary institutional racism and oppression, they feel an overwhelming feeling of not being enough (Clinic Studio, 2021). In turn, their project *A Couple of Indigiqueer Cuzzins* is meant as a comfort not only for their community, but a way to process their trauma. Recognizing the connections of Indigenous and queer experiences, such as those expressed by Neil and McLeod, can help further acknowledge the complexities that colonialization created for Indigenous and neurodivergent experiences.

Indigenous Perspectives on Individuals with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities

Indigenous voices have continued to be silenced through education. It is worth acknowledging that in addition to queer experiences, that Indigenous communities also view neurodevelopmental disabilities as an acceptable and honorable way of life. The scholarship indicates that the Western Euro-centric medical model on neurodivergence doesn't align with Indigenous perspectives. As Bruno et al. (2025) and AutismBC (2023) have mentioned, there isn't an identifiable world for disability in Indigenous languages. According to Bruno et al. (2025), along with Mitchelson and Livock (2023), Indigenous communities view neurodivergent individuals as gifted and treat them the same way as any other member of the community. Everyone maintains a reciprocal relationship within their communities with the same spiritual and cultural mindset.

Some Indigenous words can be used to describe neurodivergence, however. For instance, Grant Bruno, a father of two autistic children and member of the Plains Cree tribe in Canada, stated that there are two different terms within *Nehiyawin* (The Plains Cree language) that describe autism. The first is *acahk pimatsiwin*, which translates as "a spiritual way of life." The second term, *e-si-waskawiht*, means "given the gift of moving and being different" (Bruno et al., 2025, p. 276). These words acknowledge the diversity among autistic people who are born with gifts that are used to teach us, and "that autistic characteristics, traits or behaviors are not to be seen as negative or as needing to be 'treated' but rather to be accepted and celebrated" (Bruno et al., 2025, p. 276).

Though I am not Indigenous, their perspective on neurodiversity reflects on how I feel about myself. As one of my special interests and hyper fixations, I really enjoy

writing, with my end goal being an author one day with a best-selling folkloric horror novel. I've been interested in the genre and hearing urban legends from everywhere regardless of location and culture, which is one of the things that has shaped me into the person I am proud of today. Writing is a means of communication, used to speak to others, and, for me, to express what I consider to be a gift. This contradicts strongly with the Western, Euro-centric medical model that I was raised in, which defines those with neurodevelopmental disabilities regardless of the condition as needing to be "fixed." But as Bruno et al. (2025) described, I see my gifts to be celebrated instead.

Yet, neurodiversity, autism and ADHD in particular, are viewed as conditions that need to be "repaired." Westerners view autism within a medical model and therefore look at autism as a condition that needs to be treated. As Ellis (2023) has argued, "this results in a decreased tolerance for neurological differences and diverts attention away from supports for specific impairments in favor of attempts to 'cure' autism" (Ellis, 2023, p. 227). Western beliefs about neurodiversity are almost the same in that colonizers believed that the Indigenous way of life meant that those people were a "other" or lesser, having a sub-human existence (Simpson, 2021). Ellis (2023) points to Western anthropological sources labeling and viewing Indigenous peoples as inferior, as in descriptions of the Anishinaabe's relationship with the world around them as being distorted and fantastical with the inability to achieve a rapport with others and regressing to a childlike state. Examples like this show that much of the discussion surrounding both Indigeneity and neurodiversity has only until recently been deeply rooted in colonist attributes, which has affected both parties to this day.

Lack of Awareness on Intersectionality of Neurodiversity and Indigeneity

Since most neurodevelopmental research remains heavily Western and Euro-centric, we must acknowledge that this framing has played a role in the limiting of Indigenous perspectives. Given the historical and ongoing violations of Indigenous rights through colonialization and Westernization, many Indigenous individuals don't trust institutions in their diagnoses. Many of these fears are inspired and perpetuated by the relative lack of services, jurisdictional disputes, barriers of obtaining a diagnosis and threats of child protection services getting involved (AutismBC, 2023; Bruno et al., 2025; Ineese-Nash, 2020). Admittedly, my own diagnosis wasn't the easiest experience for me. According to my mother, the first of the two psychologists trying to diagnose me insisted that I was just "quirky" and my situation "wasn't as severe as other patients." But though I still did not fit into the Western mold, I ended up getting diagnosed with ADHD and autism.

Bringing up my own experiences of diagnosis is important to this conversation because it indicates how much society's understanding of neurodiversity is still inside a box. Individuals who are both Indigenous and neurodivergent have brought up that there are possible solutions to help this lack of understanding, which fits into decolonialization efforts as well. As noted by Ellis (2023), strategic essentialism, a concept used to empower and unify, is for marginalized groups to reclaim the narratives about them by dismantling them. This approach has been used in post-colonial theory, feminist studies, Indigenous studies, etc. (Ellis, 2023). An example is the long-term recommendations of creating a national network to enhance the mental health and well-being of Indigenous and neurodivergent individuals. Further potential solutions are

increasing partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations and programs, developing culturally appropriate assessment tools, evaluating the impact of incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and improving the experience of Indigenous People with neurodevelopmental disabilities within the criminal justice system (AutismBC, 2023; Busch & Thomson, 2024; Mitchelson & Livock, 2023). Such approaches are integral because of how much mainstream media sources tend to undermine Indigenous experiences. By bringing these issues to light, it will emphasize that neurodivergent individuals have vastly different experiences, including those intersecting with Indigenous communities.

Limitations on Research on Indigenous Neurodivergent Communities

A glaring issue that remains, however, is a lack of research on the intersectionality of Indigeneity and neurodiversity in the United States. Even though Canada, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand are also guilty of colonialization, studies in these countries have interestingly offered greater emphasis on their inclusion of Indigenous voices. But, as the literature makes clear, Indigenous people with neurodevelopmental disabilities remain one of the most marginalized groups, as Simpson (2021) and AutismBC (2023) observe in Canada. Even though there has been an increase of interest and acknowledgement of Indigenous experiences with neurodiversity, there is also still plenty of research that only focuses on the Western, Euro-centric model. This is even more evident especially in our recent political climate in the United States, as Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Donald Trump continue to provide misinformation on the causes of autism and how to “treat” it while disregarding scientific data that says otherwise. Considering how much of settler colonialization is geared

towards the eradication of Indigenous communities, whether through boarding schools, genocide, or the continued imposition of Euro-centric norms, a significant challenge is overcoming these norms to bring awareness to Indigenous experiences with neurodiversity.

The conventional understanding of neurodiversity, based on the Western medical models of autism and other conditions needing to be fixed, strongly contrasts with how Indigenous communities view individuals who are neurodivergent. To add, much of the activity surrounding the pro-neurodiversity movement is derived primarily from White scholars and Caucasian activists themselves, who are less inclined to include the experiences of other marginalized communities (Ellis, 2023; Nair et al., 2024; Simpson, 2021). When these aspects are combined, a discussion on the intersection of Indigeneity and neurodiversity can be difficult to find.

Conclusion

To bring awareness to neurodiversity within Indigenous communities, it is important that Westerners acknowledge the spiritual/cultural mindset of these communities for viewing neurodevelopmental disabilities and how colonialization negatively impacts their way of living to this day. On the podcast *The Neurodivergent Women*, Aboriginal guest Claire Johnston mentions that decolonialization of neurodivergence means “how little we are allowed and supported to contribute to society” (Mitchelson & Livock, 2023,19:00). This is essential not only in the research on intersectionality but to bring their experiences to light for the wider public. Though there is research on neurodiversity, this research remains largely within a Western Euro-centric model. This model is rather ableist and heavily focused on treating these

conditions as diseases. This has affected neurodivergent individuals and resulted in limitations of our understanding on the intersectionality of Indigenous and neurodivergent experiences both within and out of the United States. But research that does exist can assist in fostering greater awareness and inspiring decolonialization efforts. The solutions and strategies such as incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), fostering partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, and developing culturally appropriate assessment tools will help bridge the gap between Western science and Indigenous perspectives.

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